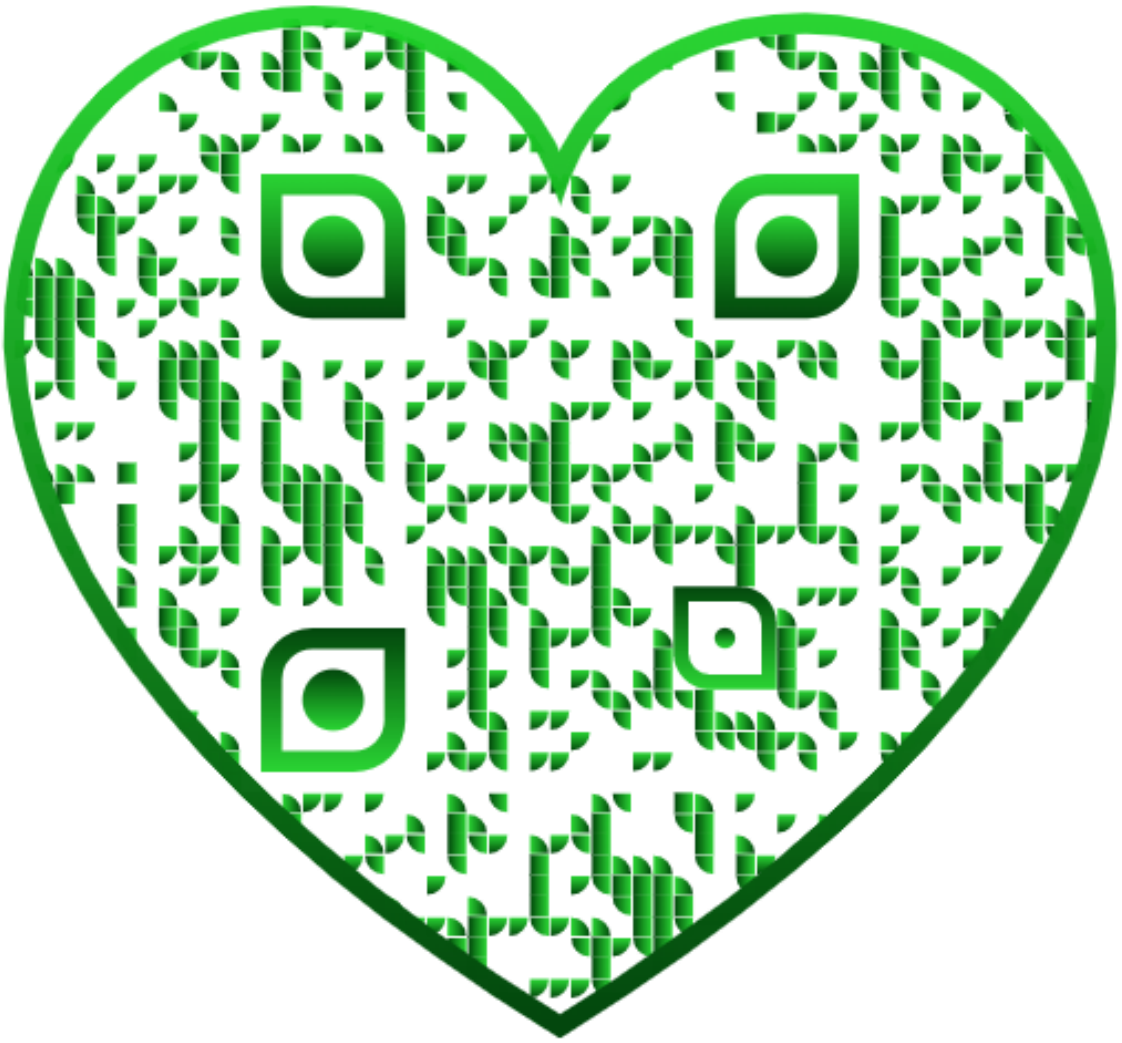
GOD RECONSIDERED

Searching for Truth in the Battle between Atheism and Religion

SCOTT S. SMITH



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by
Scott S. Smith

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Forewarning

Most books start with a Foreword or Introduction, but the subject of this one deserves a Forewarning to firm believers in both conventional religion and orthodox atheism.

Throughout the relatively brief time humans have existed, we have sought the purpose of our lives on earth. The more we have pondered age-old questions, the more elusive real answers have become for many.

Is there evidence for a God? If so, why do religions disagree so strongly about his nature and what he expects from us?

If life experiences are important to God's purposes, what about those who died in infancy or at a very early age from plagues or war? What about the millions of slaves who have had very limited ability to act freely?

Do our souls survive death? If so, will a God judge us for sins committed against a specific moral code? What about those who were unaware of these rules?

If God is all-powerful and created our spirits with their inherent tendencies to do good and evil, is he not responsible for our sins? Is there really free will if most of what we are inclined to do is heavily influenced by our DNA and early social experiences?

If God is all-knowing and he can foresee what will happen to us, can we alter that destiny?

Western religious leaders have struggled to reconcile the general belief in a loving Heavenly Father who declared the creation of the earth "good" with the harsh realities humans have always faced.

Given how much suffering is caused by disease and natural events, it is not an adequate explanation to claim that we are largely responsible because we have free will.

Others point to the fact that positive lessons can come out of suffering: we

learn humility, increase our compassion, and prioritize what is really important in life.

But do these possible benefits really make Hitler's genocide necessary, justify the horrors inflicted by earthquakes that caused the deaths of tens of thousands at one time, or lessen excruciating suffering of those who died from the bubonic plague that killed perhaps a third of medieval Europe?

Why were humans not given an earlier understanding of the causes of disease and why was anesthesia not allowed to be discovered until late in human history, if God is compassionate?

Some philosophers in Asia have asserted that suffering is deserved, the result of actions in a previous life or because we are supposedly responsible for creating our own realities. But this does not solve the problem of ultimate cause: what made someone do something wrong in that prior life…something that happened in the life before that?

Like the fundamentalist belief in predestination, a rigid notion of karma works against free will in one's current life. Reincarnation only sounds like a logical solution to our short lives; rather than providing new opportunities for personal growth, it is more likely to saddle the newborn with additional dysfunctions and diseases.

Some Eastern philosophers have even claimed that material reality and our sense of individuality are illusions, contrary to all common sense.

However, humans are by nature optimists, something that allows painful experiences to fade from vivid memory and enables our ability to bounce back from disaster. Most people do not worry a great deal about trying to reconcile the setbacks of daily life with their belief in cosmic order, accepting the paradoxes until the hereafter, when all is expected to be revealed.

This makes sense in the same way that accepting both quantum physics does, even though it shows that reality is mostly empty space, while we live in a functioning and seemingly hard material world.

If you are entirely comfortable with your spiritual path and have no interest

in rethinking its claims, read no further. There is a great deal of good that can come from adhering to a belief system that inspires ethical behavior and a sense of humility before the mysteries of life. Sometimes a faith in the face of horror is the only thing that keeps people sane.

As Ajit Varki and Danny Brower document in Denial: Self-Deception, False Beliefs, and the Origins of the Human Mind, human capacity to put our deepest terrors, even death, out of our conscious mind is almost limitless. It is a critical survival mechanism.

At the other end of the belief spectrum, critics of religion claim that there is no evidence whatsoever of anything supernatural. Skeptics argue that God is mere superstitious wishful thinking, fostered by institutions which thrive on the money and power they gain.

But while they may be brilliant in particular scientific specialties, the debunkers of all things paranormal become highly irrational when it comes to discussing evidence that contradicts their fervently-held beliefs.

A close analysis of arguments by militant secularists on any number of issues shows how they twist the facts, fail to mention evidence that contradicts their theories, and make bold claims about the state of science that are not supportable. In short, they have a passion for their viewpoints that can only be called religious.

This book is addressed to sincere seekers of whatever persuasion and aims to be accessible, rather than to try to convince those who cling to old ideas. The subject requires more open-minded common sense than advanced degrees.

Hence, I will cite readily-available sources that will allow anyone to come up to basic speed on the issues, such as Wikipedia, Dummies books, audio courses, and articles on the Net, as opposed to scholarly volumes with lots of footnotes that impress colleagues, but do not really clarify anything for the average person.

So why does any of this matter? Is it not impossible to find true answers to

any of the age-old questions about the purpose of life and the nature of reality? People will generally believe in whatever their family and culture provided at an early age and that is good enough, many would say.

But this book challenges the assumption that a diligent pursuit of answers to life's greatest mysteries is pointless. I would argue that some solutions to these philosophical problems are actually rather obvious, once we abandon conventional thinking from both the religious and skeptical points of view.

You might ask why it even matters what the answers are to some of these cosmic questions. Jesus gave the best answer: "The truth shall set you free."

Getting to the truth is not easy in a world of thousands of competing philosophies and cultural blinders to prevent us from seeing outside our own little boxes of preconceptions.

The first chapters establish that there is a reason to believe in the supernatural, putting the assumptions of materialists—who insist there is nothing beyond what we can detect with our five senses—under the microscope.

We will then look at whether there is evidence for God in nature and whether the traditional Good God of religion fits with what we know about the history of life.

Third, we will examine the answers to the big questions offered by the major religions and why they are not adequate.

Finally, we will ponder what a sounder philosophical system would look like and compare its credibility to the alternatives.

Each chapter builds on the prior ones and there really is no shortcut to reach a better understanding. It is an admittedly painstaking process that requires some dedication by the reader, but it should be rewarding. I know because I am sharing the process I went through.

Sometimes one has to go through a dark night of the soul to reach the light.

Part I

Skepticism About the Supernatural Reconsidered

Chapter One

Is There Extra-Sensory Perception?

Skeptics of the supernatural and religion boldly declare themselves rational. We can test this assertion on their terms by looking closely at their claims about three specific issues.

First, telepathy or extra-sensory perception? Some might argue that they have no problem considering this a natural ability, but the hardline skeptics say that is not the case.

Second, we will examine some cases of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) or flying saucers. Surely skeptics can make a strong case that all of the alleged incidences were matters of lay people misidentifying natural phenomena, you might think.

Finally, we will look at the assumption that there could not possibly be credible evidence of afterlife, either of the laboratory or logical kind.

In 1996, I had an opportunity to interview Uri Geller, the Israeli psychic who came to fame in the 1970s for allegedly bending spoons with his mind at a distance (manipulating material objects by thought is called telekinesis).

I have examined a fair number of so-called psychics and have been only rarely impressed, so I approached him as a skeptic.

To prepare, I read The Truth About Uri Geller, the expose by the stage magician and professional skeptic James “The Amazing” Randi. Calling Geller a fraud, Randi viewed him as “the most dangerous man in 50 years.” He quoted extensively from a blistering attack by Time and other supposedly objective sources.

He explained that Geller did not really bend spoons from afar; he would actually touch them in advance with a chemical that caused them to warp.

Randi also suggested a way to avoid letting Geller practice his “phony extra-sensory perception,” the so-called mind reading also known as

telepathy. He said the Geller will ask people to draw a picture and then guesses what it is. While they are facing him and making the drawing, he watches how the top of the pencil moves and deduces what the figure looks like in that way, warned Randi.

When I met Geller and he proposed this, I stepped into the next room and turned my back, making a circle with an X in the middle, then put the paper in my pocket. There was no way he could have any rational idea of what I had drawn.

But when I returned to the hotel lobby, where we had been sitting and there was a lot of noise, he was distracted and said he was only getting a partial image. He drew a circle exactly the same size as I had, but said he knew there had been some other element and he was having trouble getting that clearly. So only a partial hit, but interesting.

That afternoon, I attended his lecture and sat at the back of the room. Geller told everyone to pull out a key they didn't need to use or some other piece of metal. At no time did he touch the key I had brought for this, yet after a few moments, it bent by itself significantly.

A medical engineer, Eldon Bird, who introduced Geller, told me, "When you analyze the metal closely, it does not show the normal stress you expect with something that had been bent. It looks as if it had been made that way. Uri alters alloy memory. We obviously do not have a complete grasp of natural laws." He called Randi "a scumbag and a liar."

In Psychic Breakthroughs Today, Scott Rogo, responded to Randi's Flim-Flam!, a critique of Geller's ESP and telekinesis experiments at SRI International in Menlo Park, Calif., in 1972. Rogo summarized: "There was simply no way coincidence can explain some of the results."

In a detailed critique, he showed that Randi, like many militant skeptics, is willing to leave out inconvenient facts and twist the truth in order to convince readers of his agenda. It would be difficult for any informed skeptic to defend Randi's distortions of what actually took place at SRI, but that does not

prevent them from being willfully ignorant and continuing to cite him as having exposed Geller.

So if Geller is so good at mind reading, why did he not guess exactly what I had drawn? Rogo, the late, highly-respected parapsychologist (someone who does scientific studies of so-called paranormal phenomena), told me that skills like telepathy are never perfect all the time. “It’s more like a bad electrical connection, which works well only intermittently,” he said. Something like trying to read a mind in a noisy hotel lobby could interfere, it seemed.

Geller has demonstrated his skill at another type of mind power, making millions locating oil and gas reserves, a quite hard-headed business, as I can attest from having interviewed leaders in the industry.

But Rogo also noted that there is evidence that some who have been tested and seem to have genuine psychic abilities have also tried to “improve their results” by cheating. That muddies the water, but it is not an excuse for fairly evaluating double-blind clinical studies.

Of course, hardcore skeptics insist that all so-called psychic powers are just tricks any stage magician can duplicate.

But how do they explain the many double-blind experiments that show that some people definitely can read others’ minds?

In Best Evidence, investigative reporter Michael Schmicker analyzed the research on ESP and precognition (anticipation of an event) at Duke University from 1928 to 1965 by J.B. Rhine.

“Rhine suspected that ESP was not a supernatural phenomenon, but rather an unknown but natural phenomenon ultimately understandable under the laws of classical physics,” wrote Schmicker. “Consequently, it could be studied in the laboratory like any other natural phenomenon.”

A typical Rhine experiment had a “sender” look at a card in a deck and then concentrate on the symbol on the card, while a “receiver” tried to guess what he was thinking. The odds of being correct by chance should average five out

of 25 cards. Rhine continually improved his protocols to address skeptics' criticisms.

In one case, Hubert Pearce, a divinity school student, was the sender and Rhine's assistant was the receiver. "Out of 1,850 cards guessed, Pearce recorded 558 correct hits," wrote Schmicker. "The odds against guessing that many right cards was an astronomical 22 billion-to-one. Even more spectacular—though less important from a scientific proof standpoint because it was accomplished only once—was Pearce succeeding on one occasion in getting 25 straight hits in a row. The odds against such a feat? One in 300 quadrillion."

The Fear of ESP

In 1997, there was every reason to believe the publication of The Conscious Universe by Dean Radin, Ph.D., would stir significant debate among scientists about phenomena like ESP. Radin was a former Bell Laboratories engineer who directed experiments at the Consciousness Research Laboratory of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Brian Josephson, a Cambridge University professor of physics and Nobel laureate, reviewed the book, saying that its "evidence...is overwhelming."

Larry Dossey, M.D., the author of bestselling books on the effect of the mind on the body, called Radin "the Einstein of parapsychology."

Rupert Sheldrake, Ph.D., the well-regarded British author of Seven Experiments That Could Change the World, commented that "the book shows that we are at a turning point in our understanding of our minds and of nature."

So how did the intellectual establishment receive the book? With almost complete silence. Ironically, one of Radin's chapters meticulously documented the mainstream media bias against parapsychology. One did not have to be psychic to have predicted the reaction.

The only appraisal in a major publication appeared in the British scientific journal Nature, which dismissed Radin's argument because of what the reviewer claimed was a statistical error. The editor refused to publish Radin's response that pointed out that the criticism was demonstrably incorrect. It was only printed after an eight-month-long campaign by readers and after the editor had left.

As Thomas Kuhn wrote in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, "No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed, those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all."

Those who publish the magazines for militant skeptics, Skeptical Inquirer and Skeptic, also revealed their bias. The former, published by what is now known as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), simply did not mention the book at all (their former name was the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal or CSICOP, which said a little too much about their attitude towards those who disagreed).

Skeptic is published by the Skeptics Society and took a more sophisticated approach. In a few paragraphs it admitted the book was "one of the finest compilations of what we know about ESP and Psi" (another name for psychic phenomena). But then it dismissed this as "miniscule." It later published an interview with a well-known former British parapsychologist, Susan Blackmore, in which she conceded that "Dean Radin's experiments look… good." But she comforted readers by saying that she had no intention of actually investigating them.

Crichton's Change of Mind

Michael Crichton, the late novelist who earned a medical degree from Harvard, wrote Travels, a nonfiction report on his journeys around the world. Some of his experiences made his rethink his conventional scientific thinking about the supernatural.

In the appendix, he reported receiving an invitation he to address a chapter

of what was then known as CSICOP, since his bestselling novels usually centered on scientific speculation. To acquaint himself with the group, he began reading its literature.

“I was disturbed by the intemperate tone of many of the writers I admired,” he wrote. “I began to sense there was more at stake than the dispassionate assessment of questionable data. I began to see science as battling for supremacy against perceived threats from other modes of perception.”

In the talk he prepared, provided in the appendix, he laid out the reasons for being open-minded, starting with a list of medical procedures many people have had, which lack double-blind clinical studies to support them. He also reminded the audience that scientific research has been filled with fraud, so condemning an entire field like parapsychology because of such allegations would be unfair. He quoted the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Max Planck that scientific truth does not triumph by “convincing its opponents…but rather because its opponents eventually die.”

Crichton cited Marcello Truzzi, a former editor of Skeptical Inquirer who later wrote the book The Blue Sense, documenting cases of psychics helping detectives solve crimes: “Scientists are not the paragons of rationality, objectivity, open-mindedness and humility that many of them might like others to believe.”

Once CSICOP understood that Crichton was going to tell them something they did not want to hear, he was disinvited.

The Conversion of a Skeptic

Because of the rigorous enforcement of editorial orthodoxy, Radin’s book initially sold only 10,000 copies and did not stir any serious discussion in the scientific community.

Radin understood the fear his challenge generated because he started as a disbeliever in “psychic phenomena” himself. He graduated magna cum laude in electrical engineering from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst,

before getting his Master's at the University of Illinois, Champaign, where he earned his Ph.D. in educational psychology.

He began his career doing industrial psychology and technical research for Bell in 1979 and kept hearing from computer scientists about people who had "black thumbs" that caused high-tech equipment near them to malfunction. Radin investigated whether circuits could be susceptible to mental influence and was intrigued to find a correlation.

In 1985, his work had drawn the attention of SRI. Originally established at Stanford University with U.S. government funding in the early 1970s, it became an independent institution by the late 1970s.

SRI was reviled by militant skeptics because of its experiments for government intelligence agencies to determine whether information could be picked up by the mind about a distant object (documented in Jim Schnabel's Remote Viewer: The Secret History of America's Psychic Spies). But it continued to be funded because it operated under solid scientific protocols.

During a one-year sabbatical, Radin joined SRI's Cognitive Sciences Program to do classified work. There, he had access to worldwide research on psi effects.

"I learned that not only U.S. intelligence agencies, but the Chinese and Soviets, found these things quite useful," Radin wrote. "I had no idea that remote viewing could be that good on real-life targets."

From 1981 to 1985, five reviews of the evidence for the efficacy of ESP, remote viewing, and telekinesis were undertaken by government agencies, including the respected Congressional Research Service and the National Research Council. They all came to positive conclusions.

Ray Hyman, a professor of psychology who was the chairman of what was then CSICOP's parapsychology subcommittee, wrote that "the effects cannot…be dismissed as due to chance." He recommended further research.

But the scientists and those funding them agreed that after thousands of replications of some phenomena, there was no point in continuing to simply

prove their existence. They decided to concentrate on understanding how the effects worked and what the applications might be.

At SRI, Radin witnessed “how casually these world-class viewers could perform miracles in the laboratory. My initial skepticism had been beaten down and left me either having to accept the some of this was real, or just reject the whole thing as too uncomfortable.” He found researchers in the field to be “accomplished, critical-minded people with impressive credentials who were thinking the unthinkable—and only because the cloak of security protected their reputations.”

After SRI, Radin spent three years at the psychology department at Princeton University collaborating on studies with the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory. PEAR was one of the few parapsychology labs to have a university affiliation. By 1987, its 335 remote viewing trials had produced results that Radin wrote were 100 billion to one against chance. He found protocols very strict, counter to the charges skeptics made.

Radin collaborated with a Princeton colleague, Roger Nelson, on a “meta-analysis” of many studies with random number generators (RNGs), circuits which repeatedly flip “electronic coins.” Clinical subjects had to guess the results in advance. In 832 projects run by 68 researchers from 1959 to 1987, they calculated the overall results to be a trillion to one against chance.

Radin went on to the University of Edinburgh, where “ganzfield” studies had been done by Charles Honorton. This is a sensory-deprivation technique in which the “sender” of an image hears continuous “white noise” (static) through headphones, an effort to screen out distractions. His tests were done in steel-walled, sound-proofed, and electromagnetically-shielded rooms, with computers controlling procedures and professional state magicians checking to be sure there was no cheating.

In 1982, Honorton had done a meta-analysis of all known ganzfield studies to that time. Hyman challenged his conclusions and asked to independently confirm them. He did, in 1985: the odds of chance producing these results

were 10 billion to one.

Taking a Gamble

In 1993, Radin was hired to direct the Consciousness Research Lab. It was the perfect place to study whether external geophysical factors could influence the outcomes in gambling. The results might also be affected by telekinesis or telepathy. He was able to get records from one casino covering four years of slot machines, roulette, keno, craps, and blackjack.

He discovered that gambling on or near days of the full moon and avoiding doing so around the new moon increased the payout to players by two percent.

By the time The Conscious Universe was published, Radin had written 73 well-received scientific papers, been awarded numerous honors, twice served as president of the Parapsychological Association, and was slated to teach a new course on psi phenomena to meet student demand at UNLV.

But after returning from his book promotion tour, he was told by the provost that he was to close the lab and leave the university. Radin told me that the provost's contradictory explanations for the action suggested that the book's high profile had embarrassed his colleagues by their affiliation with what they regarded as pseudo-science.

Radin went on to work on practical applications of psi for a variety of nonprofit, business, and educational organizations in California. He is currently a senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences in Petaluma, on the adjunct faculty of psychology at Sonoma State University, and on the distinguished consulting faculty at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco.

Radin has written several other books since 1997 and is co-editor of Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing.

But as one learns from the Wiki entry about him, Radin's critics continue to

snipe at his details, carefully ignoring his responses and the massive weight of the worldwide clinical evidence.

Honorton analyzed how skeptical criticisms of parapsychology changed over the years: initially, they asserted any “hits” were due to chance; then they blamed experimental design flaws or incompetence of researchers.

In his first book, Radin looked at the efforts of three prominent skeptical psychologists to prove these viewpoints:

- James Kennedy, now retired, tried to replicate Rhine’s ESP card experiments at Duke University. He insisted his results were “entirely negative,” but by Radin’s calculation, their outcome was 10 million to one.
- Susan Blackmore, quoted above, claims to have left parapsychology because she was unable to replicate some experiments. But in her doctoral dissertation, Radin noted, she reported five statistically significant tests out of 19, a result that is 500 to one against chance.
- Ray Hyman (who had recognized impressive results in some experiments) reviewed 24 telepathy tests and claimed that 13 of these had insignificant results. But Radin points out that when the results of these are combined, they produce a result that is statistically significant.

In 1998, Hyman gave a speech, with Radin in the audience, in which he went through his criticisms of The Conscious Universe. He raised questions on technical issues, such as whether Radin had calculated “confidence limits” and “variance” correctly.

Afterwards, Radin had dinner with Hyman and went through the list, showing that he had accounted for the criticisms and pointing out that others had confirmed there were no flaws in the experiments that he had cited.

When I was writing an article for a mainstream magazine on the subject, I asked CSI and the Skeptics Society who could best give their response to Radin. Both referred me to Hyman, though he is only considered an expert on ganzfield studies. Hyman did not return repeated calls, despite my referrals,

because I think he knew Radin would refute each of his points.

The Impact of Close-Mindedness

Only 6% of the members of the elite National Academy of Sciences believe that “psychic” phenomena like ESP exist, although 57% of college professors do. It could be argued the NAS members, the gatekeepers of conventional wisdom, are simply more brilliant and credentialed—or more close-minded (perhaps a bit of both).

Radin argues that the refusal to dispassionately look at the evidence is harmful: “Overlooking fundamental properties is much more serious than it sounds. Many basic scientific models and experimental techniques are anchored on assumptions that the fundamentals are in fact fundamental.”

For example, the RNG experiments provide evidence that quantum theory may not be complete. Psychics’ descriptions of the subatomic state at the beginning of the 20th century sound much like the later quark model of physics and superstring theory.

Radin says there are potentially important practical uses for psi: medicine could use it in diagnosis, business could avoid losses, police could more easily recreate crime scenes, and the military could communicate with submarines beyond the reach of current technology.

Even the American Medical Association has come around, after doing its own clinical studies, to accept that practices like acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine work, even though they violate Western theories.

But not the militant skeptics, who in their journals continue to rage against everything from chiropractic to magnetic healing.

So what does all this have to do with God? Simply this: if skeptics of the supernatural refuse to fairly examine the evidence for ESP, which may be just a natural phenomenon, how can they pretend to be objective about anything more clearly paranormal?

Even a confirmed atheist like Sigmund Freud was willing to accept mind-reading as a reality, based on his own experiences with patients:

I have had good reason for asserting that everyone possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious in other people…I must suggest…the objective possibility of thought-transference and therefore also of telepathy…If I had my life to do over again, I would devote myself to psychical research rather than psychoanalysis.

Skeptics' close-mindedness, even to the point of distorting the evidence in their arguments, is worth remembering when they denounce phenomena more difficult to examine.

We will next see what the reaction to the most controversial phenomena of all, unidentified flying objects (UFOs), tells us about how intellectually honest confirmed skeptics are willing to be.

And the topic has great relevance to the question of our place in the universe and the meaning of life.

Chapter Two

Have Extra-Terrestrials Visited the Earth?

Most people take a moderate position on whether any of the often-reported sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) are evidence that extraterrestrials (ETs) have visited the earth. The concept is not so far-fetched to be dismissed out of hand, even if some of the particular accounts strain credibility.

But with its usual sweeping and authoritative arrogance, the Jan.-Feb. 2009 issue of Skeptical Inquirer was devoted to asserting that the phenomenon was entirely based on human gullibility, misperception, and mental illness. The leading expert on UFOs for the past three decades for the publisher, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, Robert Scheaffer, wrote the main article, which attempted to dismiss tens of thousands of sightings from around the world.

According to his view, the first wave of these delusions in 1947 to 1973 was due to a combination of natural phenomena or normal aircraft. The expectation that there would be something unusual in the sky was contagious, he wrote, so there were many claims, but no convincing evidence ever emerged that any of these were alien craft.

With regard to that early era, I do not have room here to go into the debate about the famous, alleged 1947 saucer crash at Roswell, N.M. Those who are interested in how skeptics misrepresent what happened should read UFO Crash at Roswell by Kevin Randle, a former Air Force intelligence officer, and Don Schmitt, a respected field investigator for the scientifically-oriented Center for UFO Studies.

There was also another type of wave 1966-1995, wrote Scheaffer, when believers focused on alleged abductions of humans by aliens. He argued that this was similar to the allegations of “recovered memories” in the same

period that supposedly revealed widespread molestation of young people by satanic cults or daycare workers.

The subject of alien abductions would require another lengthy discussion of complicated evidence, but it is worth noting that some eminent scientists and psychiatrists do agree that whatever the phenomenon is, it is worth serious study. If you want a disturbing analysis written for skeptics, try Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind by investigative journalist C.D.B. Bryan.

Schaeffer asserted that there are simple explanations for mass sightings, such as those of the many huge craft that supposedly hovered over Phoenix, Ariz., in 1997 (he claims these were just flares dropped by a National Guard unit).

Scheaffer made two arguments that underlie his need to distort the facts to fit his theories. One is that the U.S. and other governments would have to be involved in a conspiracy to cover up these phenomena, but since governments are unable to keep secrets, this is just paranoia.

In fact, prior to Wikileaks, the U.S. government kept many things classified for decades (even Vice President Harry Truman had heard nothing about the Manhattan Project).

Whether or not UFOs are a classified subject, government-sponsored committees went to great lengths to misstate the evidence and discourage public interest (see, for example, Richard Hall’s discussion of Air Force investigations and cover-ups in The UFO Evidence). If flying saucers are only being imagined, why not admit the facts and provide credible explanations?

Another argument Schaeffer made was that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” because believers’ claims “contradict accepted science in very significant ways.” He asserted the “impropriety of having well-supported, time-tested scientific principles overturned by anecdotes.”

Yet how is this to be presented, when skeptics resort to twisting the facts or ignore them altogether in their accounts of well-known UFO cases? The

reaction suggests a deep fear that something might upset conventional wisdom.

Typically, there are no more than two or three skeptics at any given time who claim to have the knowledge in a particular area—whether ESP or alternative medicine, for example—to debunk the "extraordinary claims." That makes it easy for members to take the arguments of their designated experts on faith.

But Scheaffer is a software engineer, while his predecessor in UFO debunking, Philip Klass, was an aviation editor. You would not know by listening to them that there have been better-credentialed investigators who have taken the phenomenon seriously. Among them:

- J. Allen Hynek, a Northwestern University astronomer who was tasked by the Air Force's Project Blue Book to find conventional explanations for UFO reports. He is best-known for his dismissal of some in a marshy area as being due to the natural lights created by "swamp gas." But Hynek gradually realized that a percentage of the cases could not be explained away and eventually defected and founded the Center for UFO Studies.
- James McDonald, a University of Arizona astrophysicist, who claimed to have seen a UFO himself in the 1950s. He presented impressive scientific evidence for four cases at a symposium of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969. It was studiously ignored.
- Bruce Maccabee, an optical scientist for the U.S. Navy, whose scientific study of one major UFO case was rejected for publication in a scholarly journal, since the editor disagreed with his conclusions.
- Stanton Friedman, a nuclear physicist and author of books such as Flying Saucers and Science: A Scientist Investigates the Mysteries of UFOs.

Furthermore, Thomas Bullard notes in The Myth and Mystery of UFOs: "Far from being eccentric or marginal people, UFO witnesses register normal scores on psychological tests and come from all walks of life. Among the observers are trustworthy, high-functioning people like airline pilots and

aviation crews, police officers, military personnel, business executives, college professors, and astronomers."

This is the context for examining some representative cases. To avoid boring readers with an excessive amount of technical detail, the events are only summarized (consult the original sources for the details and to confirm that the facts are being presented fairly here).

Helicopter Crew, Mansfield, Ohio 1973

Most of the details of this case are taken from A Helicopter-UFO Encounter Over Ohio and The Mansfield Helicopter Case by Hynek's former research assistant, Jennie Zeidman.

Around 11 p.m. on Oct. 18, 1973, the four-man crew of a UH-1 Army Reserve helicopter was 10 miles southeast of Mansfield, Ohio, returning to its home base of Cleveland from Columbus, where they had undergone their annual medical exams.

Capt. Lawrence Coyne, with 19-years' flight experience, had flown the route a hundred times and was sitting in the right front seat. On his left was 1st Lt. Arrigo Jezzi, at the controls. Behind Jezzi was Sgt. John Healey, a medic, and behind Coyne on the right was Sgt. Robert Yanacsek, a computer tech.

They were cruising at 2,500 feet above sea level and Yanaczek remarked on a distant red light on the right side. In 30 seconds, it suddenly was closing in on the helicopter, prompting Coyne to take control and dive 20 degrees to get out of the way. The light continued towards them and at 1,700 feet, the men braced themselves for a collision, when the object abruptly stopped, then paced them about 100 feet above and 500 feet ahead. It made no noise and caused no turbulence, all four agreed.

What they reported seeing was a 60-foot-long, cigar-shaped object of gray metal with no wings, windows, or tail, but a low dome on top. There was no conventional rotating anti-collision light beacon, just a bright red light on the

front and a white one on the back, with a green, triangular spotlight underneath, the witnesses said.

“It was an exceedingly clear night out and it blotted out the stars,” said Jezzi. Coyne reported, “You could see reflections of the red and green off the structure itself.”

Suddenly, the green spotlight shone into their cockpit and the object then flew over the copter and disappeared.

Coyne suddenly realized he was ascending, even though the control was still set for descend. Just before the UFO had moved in front of them, he knew the altimeter had read 1,700 feet, but now it was at 3,500 and climbing, as if the UFO had pulled the helicopter upwards. Coyne realized something was wrong and pulled the lever back to put it into ascend and unjam it, then put the control back on descend and the chopper leveled out.

Air Force officials in Cleveland said the men appeared severely shaken when they landed.

But arch-skeptic Philip Klass, in UFOs: The Public Deceived, pointed out that over the years, the four men varied their estimates of how long it took for the light to move from the right to being in front and above the helicopter, as well as the time it took to disappear. After extensive interviews with the witnesses, Zeidman provided a timeline which harmonized reasonably well, given the different perceptions that would be natural under the circumstances. She added that if they had had perfectly harmonized stories, that would be suspicious.

Klass charged that Coyne must have been in a panic when he thought he was 1,700 feet above sea level (which is what an altimeter measures), which would mean he only had seconds before a crash, since Mansfield is 1,400 feet above sea level. He then subconsciously changed the direction to ascend.

Coyne’s response was that he could see out the cockpit window that he was climbing, not crashing, so there would be no reason to panic. And both Coyne and Jezzi had noticed the 3,500 altitude before the direction of the

stick was changed to ascend. There was no rational explanation for how they had suddenly gotten there.

Klass then asserted that what the crew saw was just a meteor, but meteors do not last five minutes, which was the consensus of how long it took from the first observation of the red light until the UFO disappeared. Even three minutes would be longer than the duration of any fireball, nor do meteors make the turns the object did, but they do leave a trail, which none of the witnesses saw. They also do not appear as a gray cylinder to four trained observers on a clear night.

Klass argued that when Yanacsek initially saw the red light, it was just the radio tower. Zeidman pointed out that the UFO was too high and the light was unblinking for that explanation to be viable.

Klass claimed that Healey and Yanacsek were relying on Coyne for their description of the UFO, since they were out of their line of sight, but Healey said he had moved up between the front seats for a better view.

The four also received corroboration from ground observers interviewed by Zeidman. A woman and five teens in a car described a pear-shaped, blimp-like object which had shone a green light not only into the chopper, but down to the road, illuminating their car and nearby trees.

Klass tried to discredit them by quoting their statement that the UFO moved in a zigzag, while the crew said nothing about that. Zeidman pointed out that this would only have been observable from the ground.

After Klass' book was published, other witnesses of related phenomena came forward. Among them was an American Airlines first officer, who reported a bluish-green concave shape at 33,000 feet near Mansfield the same night at 7:30 p.m. "In 18 years of flying, it was the strangest thing I've ever seen," he said.

Perhaps the final word on this incident should be left to Klass' fellow skeptic, James Oberg, who commented: "Something that behaved like an alien spaceship might be expected to behave was reported by four credible

witnesses…Such reports in the past have turned out to have been honest misperceptions, but there are features of this case much harder to explain. It flies on, one of the best on the record."

Airplane Crews, Radar, and Photographer, New Zealand, 1978

Skeptic Philip Klass declared the events of December 1978 in New Zealand to be "the best documented UFO incident" and said that if it were really as advertised, it would be "the most impressive UFO case of all time." Hence, he devoted three chapters to it in UFOs: The Public Deceived and the complexity of the events and the technical aspects made it easy for him to pretend to have refuted its legitimacy.

Maccabee, the Navy scientist, corresponded with Klass to point out his misstatements of the facts and the exchange eventually reached 1,500 pages. Maccabee published his analysis in Applied Optics August 1, 1979 and in several papers circulated among scientists studying UFOs.

Right after midnight on December 21, a flight left Blenheim in the northeast of the South Island for Christchurch in its south. A half hour later, the crew saw some lights, while radar operators from nearby Wellington confirmed that they had five unidentified targets on screen. People on the ground also observed them at the same time.

At 3:25 a.m., a crew member reported seeing a brilliant light in the east for several minutes which was "very strange and I never saw anything like it." Klass would later claim this was Venus, but the witness stated that the object was much brighter than the planet and had a gold tinge.

At 3:30, Wellington air traffic control informed another plane going the same route about an unknown object in the area that had been stationary for 45 minutes and then started moving. The crew reported seeing a large white light with a red tinge, which Wellington tracked for 12 miles before it disappeared.

As the first plane from Blenheim neared Christchurch, the onboard radar

picked up an object moving towards it at 8,000 mph and the crew saw a light streak in front of them, though Christchurch picked up nothing on radar.

News of these events prompted a TV station to send a team to fly from Wellington on Dec. 30 at 11:46 p.m. At midnight, they noticed six bright, pulsating lights to the right and ahead, which would beam rays of light downwards and then suddenly appear elsewhere. Wellington radar had also picked them up, but thought they were mirages, since they instantly disappeared.

At 12:16, the plane's radar picked up something 10 miles straight ahead, where the crew saw a light, which disappeared. This was followed by a light that showed up as a solid object on radar at the 11 o'clock position 3 miles away. A minute later, another showed on radar 2 miles out, but could not be seen by the crew.

At 12:27, Wellington alerted the plane to another object at 12 o'clock 3 miles away, which was briefly seen by the crew. Two minutes later, radar picked up an object behind the aircraft. At 12:30, Wellington reported a blip to the right of the plane and two minutes later the crew saw a blinking light there, alternating green and white.

As the plane came into Christchurch Airport at 1 a.m., its radar tracked a target on the right side where the crew could see a flashing light. During the 75 minute flight, the news crew had only shot 20 seconds of film, which was not able to pick up the fast-moving objects, so one photographer agreed to go on the return flight.

That left at 2:17 a.m. Two minutes later, as they were breaking through the cloud layer, they saw a bright object on the right. At first they thought it was the moon, until they realized the moon had set two hours earlier and airborne radar was picking up a strong image. The pilot tried to turn right to get a better look, but the object kept to the plane's right and the plane then returned to heading north. The object was visible for 15 min. and filmed for 7 minutes.

At 2:34, as the others were watching the light on the right, the pilot saw a

light ahead, which passed to the left. One orange and two red lights were filmed by the crew at 2:51 and the lights appeared to roll and turn in a narrow elliptical orbit, while Wellington confirmed it had a visual. Two more orange lights were seen moving at great speed as they approached Cape Campbell.

Klass asserted that most of the radar returns were due to atmospheric conditions, but Wellington reported that the conditions were not conducive to that explanation. One quarter of the objects were also seen by a variety of witnesses.

Klass then suggested that the flashing radar target at 12:30 on Dec. 21 was a beacon, ignoring the fact that there are no beacons in New Zealand in those colors. Another debunker, William Ireland, claimed the witnesses must have seen the lighthouse on Kaikoura Peninsula, but that is only white and too weak to be seen from that distance (and the light was seen by the crew above the wing, not towards the ground).

In Scheaffer's UFO Sightings: The Evidence, he attributed the film of the lights at 12:51 on the return flight to the camera accidentally being aimed at the ground and picking up lights there. In fact, there was no ground below at that time. At other times there was, but had the camera been pointed down, it would have picked up other ground lights, which did not appear on the film, Maccabee pointed out. The witnesses' aircraft was also the only known one in the area and crew members had flown the route many times, so were not likely to become confused by ground lights.

Klass also argued that perhaps the film had picked up a reflection of the aircraft's red anti-collision beacon, but Maccabee tested this thesis and proved that the resulting image would come out very differently from what had been recorded.

Klass and Ireland asserted that the very bright light at 2:19 on the return flight was probably a reflection of a squid boat, but the size and image on the radar did not match how it would actually appear. There was also no boat in the area at the time. Of course, had this been the explanation, it would not

account for how the light paced the plane to its right.

The skeptics were made aware of the defects of their arguments, but never retracted them.

Mass Sightings in Hudson Valley, New York/Connecticut 1982-1986

Most of the following details of an extraordinary wave of sightings can be found in Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings by Philip Imbrogno, Bob Pratt, and J. Allen Hynek (this was the astronomer's last investigated case).

On December 31, 1982, a retired police officer in Kent, N.Y., was outside his home when he noticed red, green, and white lights on a slow-moving object only 500 feet over the house. The lights were bright enough that they illuminated the ground. He filmed it with his video camera, although the only thing that showed were lights moving in concert.

On February 26, 1983, witnesses in the Brewster and Lake Carmel areas of New York and neighboring Danbury, Conn., two of them air traffic controllers, saw lights over their homes in a boomerang formation, with a dark metal understructure 200 feet long.

On March 17, in Putnam County, N.Y., a man and two children saw something similar 20 feet above the ground, hovering nearby. They could also hear it hum. Others saw it move very slowly, making tight circles over a highway and then move off towards Danbury, where there were other witnesses.

On March 24, more than 1,000 people, most in York, N.Y., saw lights slowly moving in formation. Some witnesses were police officers and the local department was flooded with calls, while 15 other departments in the area received calls. Someone using binoculars claimed there was a dull green V-shaped metallic structure connecting the lights. Some witnesses who were working on aircraft and spacecraft said they had no idea what the object could be.

The most qualified witness was Bill Hale, the chief meteorologist for the National Weather Corporation, who was familiar with all kinds of aircraft and natural aerial phenomena. He said it was a quarter mile long in the shape of a check mark at an altitude of 1,000 feet and it came to a near stop, yet unlike a helicopter, it made no sound.

Two days later, physics teacher Albert Silbert was with his family returning home at night when they saw a V-shaped set of lights moving 10 feet above the trees at 40 mph Neighbors came out and they watched it through binoculars.

Sightings continued like this over the next year and some witnesses had second encounters. On March 25, 1984, an object “the same length as a football field blocked out the stars,” said one witness, with others claiming to see a structure behind the lights. Some saw it turned at right-angles and others reported the lights illuminating the ground. Again, when it moved in a particular direction, reports started coming in to police stations in that area.

On May 31, 1984, a group of police officers at New Castle, N.Y., tried to find out what they were watching by calling the Federal Aviation Agency, which offered no explanation and showed no interest in investigating. A private pilot got near enough that he said he could see the structure.

Then on July 12, 1984, some 5,000 witnesses were involved over a five-county area between 9 p.m. and midnight. The Danbury police chief and 11 other officers described the object as others had before.

A video tape was made of another incident on July 24, showing a disk-like craft with lights. This was sent to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., which found no evidence of a hoax and confirmed that the object could not be a conventional aircraft.

Also on July 24, six security guards at the Indian Point nuclear reactor in Buchanan, N.Y., reported a mysterious craft three football fields long, with a boomerang-shaped set of lights, hovering 300 feet over the plant for 20 minutes, while security systems inexplicably shut down. Though no plane

was supposed to be allowed in the airspace, the plant's official explanation was that a small plane had buzzed the site, yet no one was ever charged.

Other officials claimed the lights were a formation of ultra-light planes, but a pilot with a background in physics and electronics who viewed a video of the event told researchers that such aircraft could not carry the heavy, numerous lights that were seen. He also stated that the object was too stable to have been planes flying in formation, especially given the high winds at the time, nor could they have been silent and hovering.

A theory that these were experimental U.S. military aircraft seemed unlikely, since the UFOs' lights would often wink off; if aircraft were flying close together, this would have been suicidal. And if these were secret aircraft, why fly them close to thousands of witnesses over a number of years?

A few skeptical pilots who were not witnesses flew in formation to see if they could fool some people and they were successful, which was reported in Discover magazine as the answer for all the events. But they could neither move slowly, hover, nor make right-angle turns.

Blimps were also proposed as an explanation, but these could not move as fast as the objects were seen to do at times.

Hynek said that in the three decades he had been investigating UFOs, nothing of this scale had happened before in the U.S. and he was baffled. He commented that "hundreds of largely professional, affluent people in suburban areas were astonished, awestruck and often frightened."

Yet the FAA showed no interest—except to say they were probably helicopters or planes in formation—and no branch of the U.S. government ever offered an explanation.

As investigative reporter Leslie Kean noted in UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record, there was a similar wave of sightings in Belgium 1989-1990:

The Belgian Air Force and other agencies, including the police and the

army, were called into action. The equivalent to our FAA cooperated in mobilization to identify the objects. The Air Force made all its data available to a highly competent group of civilian scientists. All of these important developments were covered by European media.

In the Hudson Valley, local media gave plenty of coverage, but because no officials other than local policemen were involved, national coverage was minimal. The indifference was so stunning that one could justify questioning whether these events took place at all.

This puzzling situation represents one reason why intelligent, well-informed Americans “don’t believe in UFOs.” This was an extreme example of the “UFO taboo,” a deeply-ingrained refusal to acknowledge that something so contradictory to what we consider ‘normal’ could possibly exist, no matter what the evidence.

Again, hardline skeptics have chosen to take an irrational position: that aliens could not possibly have visited the earth by now, forcing them to use arguments that ignore the evidence in the most compelling cases. Instead, they could have taken a materialistic position that while ETs are possible, the evidence needs to be examined without prejudice, and that serious study should be funded.

So what does evidence for UFOs and ETs have to do with God or the supernatural?

There are those who have argued that human evolution was guided by god-like aliens, as portrayed in movies like “2001: A Space Odyssey” and “Prometheus.” This would make more sense than the Biblical creation story, since no perfection would be required to plant the seeds of life and cultivate them over eons.

And as science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke said, advanced technology would appear to humans to work like magic, which would explain witness claims that UFOs sometimes disappear instantly.

Authors Zechariah Sitchin (The Earth Chronicles) and Graham Hancock

(Supernatural: Meetings with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind) make plausible arguments that aliens have intervened throughout history. We'll revisit this ideas later.

Whatever the full truth is, it does not necessarily negate the existence of God. It could be that the creator of our bodies and the creator of our spirits are not one and the same, an idea we will revisit later.

The skeptics' hysterical reaction to any challenge to their sweeping claims of what constitutes scientific orthodoxy therefore makes their arguments suspect, even when we move into the realm of the clearly supernatural in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Is There Life After Death?

To listen to skeptics, only the gullible masses believe in an afterlife, desperate to be reunited with loved ones.

As we have shown, however, skeptics are so convinced of their intellectual superiority that they are incapable of examining evidence objectively that contradicts their strongly-held viewpoints.

Unlike the cases for ESP and UFOs, however, the evidence for survival after death is by its nature less measurable and more subtle and complicated.

Militant skeptics would have everyone believe that this is merely anecdotal and easily explained away by the biochemistry of the dying brain, pumped up by morphine and stress, with the particular hallucinations the result of a combination of wishful thinking and religious preconception. But as we shall see, this view ignores some inconvenient facts.

While looking at several types of relevant experiences, I will only focus on the issue of immediate survival after death, not theological assertions about what happens beyond that, such as whether there is a heaven or hell or reincarnation. Nor will we try to resolve here exactly what it is that may survive death.

One way to think about the larger picture of reality that the so-called supernatural presents is like the difference between the world of ordinary objects we interact with daily and the invisible quantum world that underlies everything. It is difficult for our minds to get around the fact that what seems like solid reality is mostly empty space. Skeptics are invited to imagine that the paranormal world is something like the theorized other dimensions of the "multiverse."

Death-Bed Visions

Let us begin with something that should be a perfect test for the skeptical case about hallucinations of the dying: death-bed visions. It is not uncommon for people who are about to die to imagine that the heavens open up and relatives appear to welcome them to the other side.

In What They Saw at the House of Death: A New Look at Evidence for Life After Death by Karlis Osis, a noted physics professor, and Erlendur Haraldsson, a clinical psychologist. Between them, they had carefully examined 5,000 cases of death-bed visions for nearly two decades starting in 1959. These were culled from observations by 17,000 physicians and nurses. Most were medical personnel in the U.S., but some came in from a separate study about patients in India, to check to what extent cultural and religious beliefs influenced the experiences.

Investigative journalist Michael Schmicker, in Best Evidence, summarized the remarkable conclusions:

Biological-Pharmaceutical Factors

- Patients who were given painkilling drugs were not more likely to have such visions than those who were not.
- Brain malfunctions were more likely to reduce such visions.
- A history of using psychoactive drugs did not increase the likelihood of these visions.
- There was no evidence that a lack of oxygen induced the visions.

Psychological Factors

- Stress played no role in predicting which patients would see “the dead.”
- Whether the patient believed in an afterlife did not matter.
- In some cases, the death-bed visions came to people who did not know they were dying.

Cultural Factors

- The visions often did not fit with the religious preconceptions of the

individuals. Christians saw no evidence of hell; Hindus had no visions that confirmed they would be reborn.

- There were 11 aspects to these visions that were shared by both American and Indian cases, so they are likely common to many cultures.

Schmicker cited a compelling example. In 1919, Horace Traubel, a friend and biographer of the poet Walt Whitman, was dying in Bon Echo, Ontario, Canada. With him was Lt. Col. L. Moore Cosgrave. Cosgrave reported that at 3 a.m., Traubel stared at a point in the room three feet above the bed.

"A light haze eventually resolved itself into the form of Whitman…wearing an old tweed jacket, an old felt hat, and had his right hand in his pocket," which Cosgrave could see. The apparition nodded twice to Traubel, who said, "There is Walt." As the ghost brushed by him, Cosgrave felt a slight electric shock.

Near-death Experiences

"Near-death experiences" (NDEs) was the term coined by Dr. Raymond Moody, a physician who wrote the first popular book on the phenomenon, Life After Life, in 1975. He studied cases of patients who were pronounced clinically dead, but claimed they could see and hear things that seemed impossible, according to the materialist understanding of reality.

A 1982 Gallup poll revealed that one out of seven Americans had at least once been close to dying and 35% of these reported having the NDE. These experiences would seem fairly common, but were not generally reported by physicians, which is explained by the fact that only 32% of doctors at the time believed in an afterlife vs. 67% of the public.

While the specific details of the experience would be interpreted by the person who was supposedly dead, based on his or her cultural and religious background, the most common stages occurred in this order:

- A sense of dying as a release from cares and pain.

- The patient feels he or she is rising from the body and able to look down on it and the attending medical personnel.
- This self or spirit is compelled to pass through a dark tunnel with light at the end.
- Beings of light greet the spirit at the end of the tunnel—often these are deceased family or friends and sometimes a person understood as a founder or leader of their religious tradition (atheists reported an abstract figure of light).
- As many as 29% recalled having their life's events flash through their memories, as if reviewing them before judgment.
- Many wanted to stay in this disembodied state, but were told they needed to return.
- Consciousness returns to the body, startling medical personnel, who had pronounced the patient dead.

Moody's initial report has been confirmed in thousands of cases investigated by others. The International Association for Near-Death Studies www.iands.org was founded in 1978 to encourage the serious study of the phenomenon.

Skeptics are quick to argue that all of these things can be explained by incorrect judgments about clinical death and by the combined effects of a sick brain and the drugs administered at the time.

Among the most notable books to take a more systematic scientific approach to anecdotal evidence were by medical doctors Kenneth Ring, in Life at Death, and Michael Sabom, in Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation.

Sabom in particular was skeptical. He accepted the critics' theory that NDEs were hallucinations due to heightened brain activity and was surprised to realize that they occurred most commonly in patients who had been unconscious for at least 30 minutes, when neuroactivity was reduced.

He believed that claims that these “dead” patients had accurately described what was happening around them were easily explained by hearing medical personnel discussing them or that they were educated guesses.

Sabom set up a control group of cardiac patients who had not reported having NDEs. He found the NDEers’ accounts very accurate, while the guesses of cardiac patients were way off, and he was able to rule out the possibility in many cases of the “dead” picking up the information by hearing it.

Doctors at Southampton General Hospital studied 3,500 patients and concluded that cases of NDEs being reported involved “well-structured, lucid thought processes with reasoning and memory formation at a time when their brains were shown not to function,” contradicting the materialistic view of how the brain works.

Dr. Eben Alexander’s NDE

The most famous of modern NDEs was recounted in the 2012 bestseller by Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon, in Heaven is Real: A Doctor’s Experience with the Afterlife (a good example if skeptics’ inability to state the facts in their rebuttals can be found in a response to an article in Esquire: http://iands.org/news/news/front-page-news/970-esquire-article-on-eben-alexander-distorts-the-facts.html). He went into a seven-day coma after suffering from microbial meningitis in 2008 and had an experience that ran counter to his expectations. He recalled:

I did not believe in the phenomenon of near-death experiences…I sympathized deeply with those who wanted to believe that there was a God and I envied such people the security that those beliefs no doubt provided. But as a scientist, I simply knew better.

When I entered the emergency room, my chances of survival in anything beyond a vegetative state were already low, but they soon sank to near nonexistent. For seven days I lay in a deep coma, my body was unresponsive,

my higher-order brain functions totally offline.

All the chief arguments against near-death experiences suggest that these are the results of minimal, transient, or partial malfunctioning of the cortex. But mine took place not while my cortex was malfunctioning, but while it was simply off. This is clear from the global cortical involvement documented by CT scans and neurological examinations. According to current medical understanding of the brain and mind, there is absolutely no way that I could have experienced even a dim and limited consciousness during my time in the coma, much less the hyper-vivid and completely coherent odyssey I underwent.

A 2001 study reported in the British medical journal The Lancet reported that the NDEs could not be explained by reactions to medications, a lack of oxygen to the brain, or fear of death.

Perhaps most convincing is that patients are able to report events outside the room where their bodies were. For example, some claimed that their spirits went into the waiting room and heard conversations between family members, which they recalled accurately. Given the skeptics' position on ESP, this should be impossible.

In 1990, Seattle pediatrician Melvin Morse's Closer to the Light examined the cases of 120 children who had NDEs. In most cases, they would have been too young to have absorbed a well-grounded religious expectation of what might happen. He made a point-by-point refutation of the skeptics' arguments about the biochemistry of death and hallucination, compelling enough to have persuaded some skeptics to take a more open-minded position.

In Beyond: On Life After Death, Fred Frohock attempted to weigh the evidence objectively and concluded:

The problem with the materialist explanation that NDEs are a purely neurological reaction to the stress of death is that we would have to stretch the powers of the brain to new and unproven levels of achievement. The

weight of the likelihood, of possibilities, seems to be in favor of transcendent experiences, although NDEs could be both transcendent and part of the physical world.

The brain may be the instrument that guides the self into a realm of existence as real and empirical as the dimension we currently occupy. All we have to do is move the perimeters of physical reality out to more comprehensive dimensions. Death is as ordinary as birth, and may be the same kind of portal to another empirical stage of life. Physicists tell us there must be more dimensions to reality to explain the reality we sense and know.

In Dr. Andrew Newberg's Teaching Co. course The Spiritual Brain, he cites the impact these experiences have on those who go through them: "People come away from a near-death experience with a radically altered set of beliefs about themselves, the meaning of life, relationships—everything. They no longer fear death and are more spiritual and less religious. Many say things like, 'I don't think there is a God; I know there is a God.' One said that the experience was 'bigger' than religion, which was not sufficient to help encapsulate the NDE."

Out-of-Body Experiences

But some aspects of the NDE mimic other experiences, such as the phenomenon known as an out-of-body experience (OBE). While the NDE is involuntary, the OBE may be a spontaneous occurrence or it could be something the individual wills.

While this is not a direct indicator of survival of death, it does provide evidence that humans consist of something other than a body: a "spirit" that can separate from it under certain conditions while the body remains alive.

Such experiences have been recorded around the world throughout history, often by shamans who claim to have gone into the "spirit world" to receive guidance. In a study of 70 non-Western groups by D. Shiels for the Journal of Psychical Research in 1978, the core experiences of being able to leave the

body voluntarily were very similar, despite major cultural differences.

I interviewed Scott Rogo, the highly-regarded parapsychologist, in June 1990. Two months later, he was murdered and my interview appeared in the December issue of Fate magazine. I particularly admired his hardheaded approach to the field, always skeptical about easy explanations for so-called paranormal phenomena. He had his first book published at 19 and by the time of his death at 40, had written 29 others.

One of these was Leaving the Body: A Complete Guide to Astral Projection (another name for intentional OBEs). In addition to recounting many credible experiences of people able to describe distant events as they hovered over them, Rogo had lots of personal knowledge. He had trained himself to leave his body and once while out of town, returned in spirit to his home to find his roommate had someone visiting. He confirmed this when he came back from the trip.

In his Psychic Breakthroughs Today, Rogo reviewed some of the best anecdotal collections by people who had repeated experiences with this, such as Sylvan Muldoon's The Case for Astral Projection and Dr. Robert Crookall's The Supreme Adventure. It appears that 10-20% of the population almost anywhere in the world has had at least one OBE.

Rogo also discussed lab experiments to induce these experiences. Noted psychologist Dr. Charles Tart at the University of California at Davis, for example, in the 1960s had subjects fall asleep and try to prove they had left the body by viewing a number that was placed out of sight.

In some cases, Tart found that when the individual later reported being out of the body, brain waves showed strange activity that indicated he or she was neither asleep nor awake.

One of his most notable clinical subjects was Robert Monroe, who went on to write the classic memoir Journeys Out of the Body. During one experiment, Monroe's spirit went into the hallway and accurately reported that the lab technician who was supposed to be monitoring him was there

talking to someone else.

Another set of experiments were conducted at Duke University by Dr. Robert Morris. His most outstanding subject was Keith Harary, who would later become a parapsychologist himself. Rogo called the system of testing him “ingenious” and the results “stunningly successful.”

A study of those who claimed to have undergone OBEs was supported by the University of Kansas Medical Center and the renowned Topeka-based Menninger Foundation. They compared these who had these experiences with those who did not claim to have had them. “They could not find any specific personality characteristics differentiating people who experience the phenomenon from those who do not,” wrote Rogo.

Finally, Rogo also considered the credible anecdotal evidence that some saints and mystics of a variety of religions have had the ability to be more than one place at once, known as bilocation. This could be either as an apparition or seemingly having their body in both places at the same time. In Miracles, Rogo (who had no religious affiliation), provided the thought-provoking documentation. But it is not likely a lab will be able to test this phenomenon.

Ghosts

The most commonly reported evidence for human afterlife is the encounter with apparitions of people who are dead.

“Ghosts are a universal phenomenon, seen again and again without end by people of every culture, religion and country,” wrote Schmicker in Best Evidence. “They have been reported for thousands of years by people from every economic, educational, and social strata. They have been seen by kings and peasants, hamburger-flippers and nuclear scientists, aborigines and bank presidents, doctors and laborers, by famous people and by average citizens, by men and women and children of every age and sex.”

In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in England

to support a scholarly investigation of such phenomena.

Four years later, its first report was published, a two-volume, 1,400-page summary of 700 cases (edited and updated by Eleanor Sidgwick in 1923 in the revised edition of Phantasms of the Living).

One of the cases occurred on Dec. 7, 1918, involving a Lt. David McConnel, a pilot trainee who was flying to an airbase when he crashed and died at 3:25 p.m. At about that time, his roommate, Lt. J.J. Larkin, claimed to have him in the pilot lounge and reported that McConnel told him he "had a good trip," then left.

Fifteen minutes later, a friend of the two came into the lounge and wondered when McConnel would be back so they could all go to dinner together. Larkin informed him that McConnel had already returned, but they could not locate him.

Later that night, they learned of his death and informed their commander of the experience, as well as writing his family a detailed letter about it.

The best example of a ghostly haunting of one location cited by Schmicker is Borley Rectory in Essex, England. From 1863 until it burned down in 1938, there were some 100 persons who were witnesses to seven different ghosts and a variety of related phenomena. Harry Price's The Most Haunted House in England: 10 Years' Investigation of Borley Rectory details the strange happenings.

Mediums

One of the most sensational books on evidence for the survival of the human soul after death was the 2002 bestseller The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life After Death by Gary E. Schwartz, Ph.D., and William L. Simon. Schwartz is a professor of psychiatry and medicine at the University of Arizona, a graduate of Harvard and former director of the Yale Psychophysiology Center, with 450 published scientific papers. His credentials did not make his report any less controversial.

Schwartz and his colleagues conducted clinical tests on a handful of so-called psychic mediums, including Allison DuBois (the inspiration for the TV series “Medium”), John Edward (who also had a TV show), George Anderson, Suzane Northrop, George Dalzell, Anne Gehman, and Laurie Campbell.

The 374-page book details not only the precautions taken to prevent fraud and statistical analysis of the possibilities of chance in the results, but his responses to the charges of professional skeptics (including James Randi and Ray Hyman, whose criticisms of ESP experiments we cited earlier).

In the early 1990s, I was trying to find a legitimate medium—someone who could “channel” messages from the dead for the living—for reports in Fate (which was making an effort to avoid printing just any psychic’s claim and was counting on my experience as a business reporter to screen for the better ones). Frankly, I could not find many, but there were a few.

One was Bevy Jaegers, a St. Louis psychic with a particular skill known as psychometry. That is the ability to handle an object and psychically pick up information related to it. For example, she would touch a piece of clothing a victim had been wearied when murdered and would have images of the crime flash before her. In its peculiar way, this was receiving “messages from the dead.”

When I visited with her, she set up a number of meetings and phone calls with law enforcement officials who had worked with her on 50 murder cases. We began to collaborate on a book about her work, but my more mundane career was skyrocketing and we did not have time to finish it before she died (and yes, mediums do not generally get warnings about their demise). But the experience did convince me that she had been largely accurate and was certainly not a fraud.

I had read what the skeptics had to say about the medium James Van Praagh, who had a TV show at the time, so I went to his “group reading” very well-armed (for the same reason that I prepared to expose Uri Geller).

I took careful notes on whether his information, allegedly from the dead for loved ones in the audience, was accurate and was surprised that most of it did seem to be. There appeared to be a few misses and there were some things that could not be verified at the time.

In our follow-up interview, we discussed the views of his critics. I cannot say for sure that he has never cheated, but as I mentioned previously, there is evidence that some seemingly genuine psychics have tried to "improve" their results.

As part of my research, I also went to a "séance" conducted by Edward one Halloween. I was convinced he was a fraud at the time, not because I could prove it, but what he did seemed like nothing more than a parlor trick in the dark. After reading The Afterlife Experiments, I had to have a more open mind about his achievements.

I also had studied George Anderson previously, including watching him in a TV documentary and reading his 1989 bestseller, We Don't Die. I think it is fair to say that if there is one medium whose accuracy has been repeatedly confirmed by thousands of readings, Anderson is it.

Of the others in the Schwartz book, I had two personal readings by Laurie Campbell. The first turned out to be surprisingly accurate in looking into my past and forecasting the future, while the second, five years later, did not even hit the target. This was, I had learned, not atypical of even the best (as Rogo observed, psychic talent seems to operate like an unreliable electrical connection that frustrates those who claim to have such abilities).

I do not put much stock in getting reliable information from any medium, but for those who want comfort without being gullible, it is worth getting a reading from any of those purported to be the best, without thinking it will be infallible revelation.

Another interesting source on mediums is Victor Zamit's A Lawyer Presents the Case for the Afterlife. It pulls together a huge amount of information for every kind of "evidence" of the hereafter, although I am a

skeptic about the New Age channeling examples. Spirits, I have become convinced, love to promote specific belief systems that contradict each other.

Animal Apparitions

Finally, I would like to consider something that would not seem to provide much promise of credibility, but is one of my specialties: encounters with animal ghosts. I recounted 125 cases in The Soul of Your Pet: Evidence for the Survival of Animals After Death (dozens of others that came in after the third edition in 1998 will be included in the next version of Animals and the Afterlife by Kim Sheridan).

The understandable skeptical response to this notion is that anecdotes that claim that people saw their dead pets are clearly based on wishful thinking. That would make some sense, since many people grieve severely when they have bonded with a companion animal for 10 or 20 years.

The trouble with this theory is that it does not explain most of the stories I reported. I really had no idea what I would receive when I sent a request for information from readers of veterinary professional journals and publications about the paranormal.

The most striking thing about most of the stories was their credibility:

- Many witnesses were not the owner of the pet encountered, so a desire to see it played no role.
- Other cases involved multiple witnesses, so the events were not simply one person’s hallucination.
- Some involved more than one sense—the witness not only had a sustained view of the dead animal, but could hear or feel it, making it less likely they were simply imagining the event.
- Some witnesses were veterinarians, doctors, psychologists and other professionals who would be expected to take a more objective attitude than most people.

- Many stated they had never had a paranormal experience of any kind before or since the event and others said they were not religious in any way (virtually no one said their religious background taught that animals have spirits, although an ABC News/Beliefnet poll showed that 43% of Americans believe animals go to heaven, while 17% are unsure; 40% disbelieve, including both those who religious views deny that any animal has a spirit and those who do not believe in the supernatural at all).
- Perhaps the most intriguing cases were those that involved the reactions of other animals, making it apparent that these incidences were not simply figments of human imagination. For example, one evening a witness reported that she was at home with her two cats, watching TV on a couch. Suddenly, what appeared to be her recently deceased third cat came out of the kitchen and walked across the living room, then went right through the closed bedroom door. The two living cats had gone to the edge of the couch to stare at the ghost as it walked by them, then when it disappeared, they ran up to the bedroom door and stood there briefly before running away. They refused to go into the bedroom for months thereafter.

The point is that if there is evidence that even some animals have an afterlife, that makes it all the more likely than humans survive death.

The likelihood of human survival of death does not explicitly provide evidence for God or any particular religious philosophy. However, it would be evidence that the global phenomenon of belief in the supernatural has a grounding in some kind of alternate reality that deserves more study.

In the next section, we will look at whether nature and history provide evidence for the benevolent God of traditional religion.

Part II

Belief in a Good God Reconsidered

Chapter Four

Is Natural Order Due to a Higher Intelligence?

The Old Testament of the Bible is the foundational document of Western monotheism and a close study sheds light on the nature of God, according to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

It starts with the two creation stories in Genesis (which appear to have been pasted together without any concern for consistency). A relative minority of hardcore Christian fundamentalists still cling to the absurd idea that the Bible is "inerrant"—word-for-word perfect in its original manuscripts, even though we do not have them to confirm this (defenders of this position should read Biblical Nonsense by Jason Long). The same believers often insist that the creation was accomplished in six days.

These fundamentalists are the perfect foil for bestselling books by militant atheists, like Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion, Sam Harris' The End of Faith, and Christopher Hitchens' God Is Not Great.

Basing their attacks on a literalist interpretation of the Bible is a cheap shot, says John Haught, a leading expert on the dialogue between science and religion, in God and the New Atheism, since sophisticated believers in the Abrahamic tradition now embrace the idea of divine guidance of evolution. But the new breed of atheists likes easy targets, he argues, contrasting their "cognitive swagger" unfavorably with the great skeptical minds of the 20th century, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche.

David Berlinski, a philosopher who describes himself as a secular Jew in The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions, raises a number of issues about Neo-Darwinism. "Darwin's theory is the creation myth of our time," he wrote. Science philosopher Mary Midgley put it another way in the title of her book, Evolution as a Religion.

It is certainly true that there is not full agreement among scientists on all

issues relating to evolution. Prominent biologists who have challenged conventional wisdom include John Sanford of Cornell (who invented the gene gun), Francis Collins (director of the National Institute of Health and author of The Language of God), and Richard Lewontin of Harvard (author of Biology as Ideology), as well as the late Nobel Prize winners in physiology John Eccles (for work on the synapse), Ernst Chain (penicillin), Alexis Carrel (transplants), and George Wald (retina).

One could argue that the general consensus among evolutionary biologists is rooted not in Darwin, but in Newtonian science, with its emphasis on a purely material explanation for everything.

Yet the so-called Intelligent Design (ID) theory, popular with evangelical Christians, is really another name for the old Creationism, which does challenge the entire idea of evolution and does not offer serious evidence for an intelligent designer.

Sam Harris laid out the case against ID in Letter to a Christian Nation:

Over 99% of species are now extinct and this fact alone appears to rule out intelligent design. When we look at the natural world, we see extraordinary complexity, but we do not see optimal design. We see redundancies, regressions, and unnecessary complications; we see bewildering inefficiencies that result in suffering and death. We see flightless birds and snakes with pelvises. We see species of fish, salamanders, and crustaceans that have nonfunctional eyes because they continued to evolve in darkness.

Our own bodies testify to the whimsy and incompetence of the creator. Men have a urinary tract that runs directly through the prostate gland, so the prostate tends to swell throughout life. A woman’s pelvis has not been intelligently designed as it could have been to assist in the miracle of birth. Consequently, each year hundreds of thousands of women suffer prolonged and obstructed labor that results in a rupture known as an obstetric fistula.

Michael Shermer, who heads The Skeptics Society, gives another example in Why Darwin Matters: “The human eye is built upside down and

backwards, requiring photons of light to travel through the cornea, lens, aquaeous fluid, blood vessels, ganglion cells, amacrine cells, horizontal cells, and bipolar cells before they reach the light sensitive rods and cones that transduce the light signal into neutral impulses—which are then sent to the visual cortex at the back of the brain for processing into meaningful patterns."

On this point, the atheists are right: it is hard to reconcile an all-powerful Creator with the fact that evolution took hundreds of millions of years, with uncountable numbers of creatures dying along the way of a messy process that showed no signs of a Master Intelligence pushing it towards the intended destination.

Anatomically modern human beings developed in Africa less than 200,000 years ago and agriculture only began about 10,000 B.C. This would appear to support a creation story driven by either an impersonal intelligence you could call blind Nature or the deist God, or some alien species with limited capabilities to push the process faster and smarter, or which has a disinterest in the results once evolution has started.

The Heretics

But biologists are not the only ones with expertise on whether there is evidence of a higher intelligence in nature.

Berlinski makes the argument based on the new physics: "Western science has proceeded by filling in the gaps of our knowledge, but then creating gaps all over again. The process is inexhaustible. Einstein created the special theory of relativity to accommodate certain anomalies in the interpretation of Clerk Maxwell's theory of the electromagnetic field. But general relativity is inconsistent with quantum mechanics, so the largest visions of the physical world are alien to one another. Anomalies have grown great because understanding has improved. Many physicists argue that some elements of ID are needed to explain cosmic order."

There are many physicists who accept that there is some kind of grand intelligence behind or built into nature, though not necessarily a personal God. They have argued that the type of traditional materialism biologists base their views on is not sufficient to explain the full spectrum of reality. Among the most prominent scientists who believe a much more complicated system is necessary to account for our increasingly awareness of nature:

- Gerald Schroeder (author of The Science of God)
- Charles Townes (Nobel Prize winner for co-discoveries about lasers and masers)
- Paul Davies (author of The Mind of God)
- Freeman Dyson (author of The Scientist as Rebel)
- Robert Laughlin (author of A Different Universe)
- Arno Penzias (Nobel winner for co-discovering comic microwave background radiation)
- Brian Josephson (Nobel for superconductivity work)
- Lee Smolin (author of The Trouble with Physics)

There are two other figures have recently upset militant materialists to an unprecedented degree because of their credentials and new arguments.

One is Thomas Nagel, a highly respected professor in the department of philosophy at New York University. His 2012 book, Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False, has received admiring reviews by bastions of intellectual rigor such as The New York Times and Science. Although Nagel remains an atheist, he challenges the reductionist philosophy that fails to account for consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and value, “threatening to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture, extending to biology, evolutionary theory, and cosmology.”

Another disrupter of convention wisdom is the English philosopher Anthony Flew. Flew set the agenda for modern atheism with a symposium

paper in 1950 that became the most-published argument ever for the materialist analysis of the universe. He represented this in debates with theists, alongside Paul Kurtz, founder of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, which publishes The Skeptical Inquirer.

Gradually, though, as Flew studied new developments in evolution and physics, he changed his mind. In 2004, he announced that he had been convinced of an impersonal force behind the natural order, the “first mover” of Aristotle’s philosophy. This is not the personal God of Western monotheism, nor does Flew think there is an afterlife, but his apostasy from materialist orthodoxy caused shock waves.

“I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence and that the universe’s intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God,” he wrote in There Is A God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind.

Flew has three primary criticisms of the materialist version of evolutionary orthodoxy: there is not a good explanation for how nature exists at all, why it obeys laws, and why intelligent and purposeful beings arose from matter.

He was attacked on the last point as not being informed by the latest scientific experiments, to which he responded: “My concern was not with this or that fact of chemistry or genetics, but with the fundamental question of what it means for something to be alive and how this relates to the body of chemical and genetic facts viewed as a whole. This is properly the job of philosophers, not of the scientists as scientists; the competence specific to scientists gives no advantage when it comes to considering this question.”

Flew quoted Albert Einstein on this last point: “The man of science is a poor philosopher.”

As for the jump from matter to life, Flew cites leaders in the experimental field that it remains extremely mysterious and we may never figure how it happened.

Regarding the natural order, he argues that the important point is not that

there are regularities in nature, but that these are “mathematically precise, universal, and ‘tied together.’”

Flew points out that greatest minds of physics have shared this philosophy, starting with Einstein, who has been misrepresented as an atheist because he said he did not believe in a personal God.

In Einstein and Religion, one of his friends, Max Jammer, quoted some of his comments: “I’m not an atheist and I don’t think I can call myself a pantheist. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written these books and suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books.”

Einstein maintained that God manifested himself “in the laws of the universe as a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble.”

Other pioneers of the new physics who felt the same, include Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Erwin Schroedinger, and Paul Dirac.

To those who espouse the Anthropic Principle, that everything from the earth’s atmosphere to the color of the sun perfectly supports our existence because of a series of accidents, Flew scoffs.

This requires theorizing many universes to make the mathematical odds work out, quoting the English philosopher Richard Swineburne, author of The Coherence of Theism: “It is crazy to postulate a trillion (causally unconnected) universes to explain the features of one universe, when postulating one entity (God) will do the job.”

But Flew’s deity of the natural order does have a couple of weaknesses. One is that this provides no satisfactory answer as to why there is so much suffering in the world. While he inspires awe, this is the God of the deists, who believe in a Creator who wound up the clock of the universe and left.

But perhaps the God who authored the cosmological laws is not the same as the Creator of the earth, who took 3.8 billion years to get the project done,

with all its apparent mistakes, an idea we will explore later.

Reason, Faith, and Morality

The secularist arguments for a philosophical basis for social morality show an over-confidence about human nature, if one looks at the last couple of centuries when reason has become an important tool of intellectual leaders.

Haught points to a fundamental weakness in the arguments that rely on only a very narrow definition of reason to be able to make decisions about the truth:

The new atheists are unable to remove all traces of faith from their own minds. They have to first believe that the real world is rational, that truth is something to be valued and respected, and that their minds are of such integrity that they can grasp meaning and make valid claims to truth.

Scientific naturalists believe—since they cannot prove—that science is the privileged way to encounter the real world, that only scientifically available evidence counts, and that only scientific understanding and knowledge can be trusted. It ignores the subjective side of nature—such as our inner experience of love, beauty, and art—as irrelevant to a fundamental understanding of the universe.

Evolutionary science has a plausible explanation for why our minds are adaptive, but it is not enough to justify the enormous trust we have in our minds to put us in touch with reality or the truth. Darwin would agree.

Atheistic materialists would argue that reason is necessary to determine objective facts about the world and that subjectivity is appropriate for value decisions. Many of them think that an entirely secular “rationality” can provide the basis of an ethical society. They certainly have plenty to criticize in the cultures with a basis in the Bible.

Any Higher Power should demand that its followers take its moral vision seriously, so whatever ideology one embraces has consequences for daily

life.

Yahweh (the Israelite God translated as Jehovah) is an easy target for critics of Biblical ethics. As Dawkins puts it: “God is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

Allah in the Koran is depicted in a somewhat better light, although he is supposed to be the same deity as Yahweh. In any event, early Muslims understood that he authorized the military conquest of the Middle East and North Africa, with all the suffering that entailed.

Steven Weinberg, a physicist who shared a Nobel Prize for developing the theory of electroweak unification, stated at a conference of his fellow unbelievers, “For people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

So how do those who share this view address elephant in the room: that the greatest monsters of history, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, were atheists?

The late Christopher Hitchens started his response by trying to discredit those like Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi, who are widely admired for integrating religious belief and humanitarianism. He also insisted that Martin Luther King’s work had no serious religious basis (apparently having never read King’s classic Letter from a Birmingham Jail).

Hitchens even added that “we do not know Abraham Lincoln’s private religious beliefs.” In fact, Stephen Mansfield’s new study, Lincoln’s Battle With God, cited new documentation that by the end of his life he had come to believe in his own version of Christianity.

Having gotten these inconveniences out of the way, Hitchens quoted George Orwell approvingly: “A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy.” Hitchens argued that “it was probably not a coincidence that fascist movements arose first and most excitedly in Catholic countries because they were in favor of the defense of traditional values against Bolshevism, and

upheld nationalism and piety. The Catholic Church was generally sympathetic."

He admitted that it eventually realized that Nazism was a "quasi-pagan phenomenon which sought to replace Christianity." But he added that "25% of the SS were practicing Catholics" (while Dawkins blames Hitler's actions in part on his having grown up Catholic).

Having flippantly dealt with Nazism and religion, Hitchens turned to "Soviet and Chinese Stalinism, with its exorbitant cult of personality and depraved indifference to human life and rights." He admitted that both Communist governments severely suppressed religion and seizure of "the obscenely rich holdings of the church," but explained this as only due to the prior support of the church for the dictators the revolutions had overthrown.

By defining true atheists as rational people who would never join a secular cult, Hitchens was unable to find any atheists who committed crimes against humanity.

Berlinski responds:

Throughout the careers of the Nazi leaders, these scum acted as if no power was higher than their own. Dawkins is prepared to acknowledge the facts while denying their significance. Neither the Nazis nor the Communists, he affirms, acted because of their atheism. They were simply keen to kill a great many people. Atheism had nothing to do with it. But, in fact, what Hitler, Stalin, Mao and a thousand party hacks did not believe was that God was watching what they were doing.

Haught argues that there is an inability among the new atheists to even recognize the contradiction in their righteous criticism of God's ethics.

The books shriek with passionate protest against the evils wrought in the name of monotheism. So what is the ground of the new atheists' sense of rightness? Is it simply a social, cultural, and historic consensus? Nazism and anti-Semitism draw their authority also from a social consensus.

Or is mindless evolution sufficient? If so, how can the amoral process of

natural selection become the ultimate court of appeal for what is moral? If science itself is the only way to provide such independent assessment, then the quest for proper validation only moves the justification process in the direction of an infinite regress.

Enlightened Dogma

It is worth remembering that the European Enlightenment was led by fierce secular critics of Christianity, whether they called themselves atheists, agnostics, or deists, including David Hume, Voltaire and Denis Diderot.

For quite justifiable reasons, the humanistic values of the Enlightenment led to the French Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which sounds like our Declaration of Independence. A Republic of Virtue was declared, which was initially defended by Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, among other American deists, as well as the French hero of the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette.

Enlightenment thinkers and political leaders in Britain initially saw the French Revolution as part of the natural progress of humanity during the Age of Reason.

But the conservative English political philosopher Edmund Burke prophetically warned that that it would lead to the execution of its perceived internal enemies en masse and that a great general would eventually take charge of its forces, which would attempt to overthrow all governments.

“Everything is referred to the production of force; afterwards, everything is trusted to the use of it,” Burke wrote of its philosophy. “The state has dominion and conquest for its sole objects—dominion over minds by proselytism, over bodies by arms. It is a sect aiming at universal empire.”

“It was the first description of the modern ideologically-driven totalitarian state and the French model had a profound influence on the Russian and Chinese revolutions,” wrote Jesse Norman in “Edmund Burke: The First Conservative.” (Karl Marx sharply criticized Burke in vol. II of Das Kapital).

As Suzanne Desan, in The French Revolution in Global Perspective, said, “The Enlightenment did not cause the revolution, but it laid the foundation.” It and Marxism both seemed initially like logical reactions to desperate situations caused by the privileged class, including the dominant churches.

But in both cases, the conviction that there was a rational and immediate solution to everything led to a fierce arrogance towards those who adhered to tradition or counseled a more moderate course, such as Lafayette, who was forced to flee.

The revolutionary leaders ordered Catholic priests to marry and to take a loyalty oath to the state, on pain of expulsion or imprisonment. Some 6,000 married, while 20,000 (one-third of the total) left the country. The rest were pressured to denounce their religious beliefs, though some continued to minister in secret. The state instituted elections of bishops by the public, even by voters who were not Catholic.

By 1793, the dechristianization campaign had resulted in most churches being shut, converted into factories, or recreated as Temples of Reason, with statues of philosophers substituting for those of saints.

The state produced a new calendar, replacing the week that started with the Sabbath with 10-day periods, and new secular holidays replacing religious ones. Its effort to popularize a “non-superstitious” religion, acknowledging a deist impersonal creator, never caught fire.

The revolutionaries executed 42,000 of those judged to be enemies of the state, then another 200,000 died during the popular regional revolts against the heavy hand of the Paris government.

Like later Marxists, the French government advocated trans-national “wars of liberation” and invaded neighboring countries with their new-style mass citizen armies. One of the devout revolutionaries, Napoleon Bonaparte, became its leader in 1799 and these wars resulted in the deaths of 1.8 million French and their allies, as well as two million other Europeans.

The main lesson is to beware those who announce their virtue loudly and

want to impose their morality on everyone else. There is no one more fanatically devoted to their new crusade than a convert who believes the idealistic end always justifies the means—regardless of whether they believe in God or not. Atheists and the anti-religious are, it turns out, human after all.

Arguing that the excesses of the leaders of the Soviet Union and Communist China automatically exclude them from the community of atheists is like the position that the popes who ordered the Crusades were not Christian and therefore the faith cannot in any way be blamed. One side narrows the definition to mean “humanists,” while the other decrees that only “true Christians” can belong to the faith.

Since the use of violence to compel agreement has gone out of fashion for both the left and right, the secular and religious, the cultural establishment now uses laws and the media to enforce its views, which can have a variety of harmful effects, from inhibiting new ideas in medicine to preventing professional advancement (as any heretic in academia will confirm).

The modern cultural elite have learned nothing from the attitude of their forebears, the scientists at the end of the 19th century who were certain that all important scientific laws had been discovered, except for some small details that the theory of the ether was supposed to handle.

As Thomas Kuhn argued in his classic analysis, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, the intellectual consensus initially rejects revolutionary ideas and will not countenance their teaching. Then as evidence builds for these views, they become officially tolerated. Eventually, they are accepted and then the intellectual establishment acts as if it accepted them all along.

Having established that there is evidence for a supernatural dimension and that many scientists believe natural laws guiding the universe indicate a higher intelligence behind them, does that mean the Good God of traditional religion exists? We will look closely at what history and nature tell us in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Is Life on Earth Evidence of a Benevolent Creator?

For those who believe in a good God, facing the problems with traditional explanations for suffering can be upsetting. However, if you keep moving through the layers of truth that need to be peeled back from the cosmic onion, spiritual comfort can be found.

It is possible to acknowledge the full reality of evil in the world and recognize God's responsibility and still find great value in being devout. And acknowledging the ugliness of life does not, of course, negate its many beauties. Think of this like a near-death experience: there is a divine light at the end of the dark tunnel.

The first step towards the truth is to understand why there are serious difficulties with the justifications given for the origins of evil and suffering offered by religions East and West. I do not think it is necessary to either make highly technical arguments that might satisfy professors of religion and philosophy or those who insist on evidence that no one can argue with.

Nor will I provide seemingly endless examples to make my points, just sufficient ones to convince seekers that the subject is worth pursuing further. Those who want more details can do so in the referenced sources. I am aiming for the middle way of common sense that the extremists in the debate have abandoned.

The first question that has to be faced is whether this world is on balance "good," broadly defined. After all, most religions assert that God is good and presumably his creation would need to have been a good idea. In the opening chapter of the Bible about the creation of the world, Genesis, verses 1-13 affirm that "God saw that it was good" six times. In fact, after six days of work, God rests, declaring of his handiwork that "it was very good."

Let us take an honest look at not only what earth life like for many people

today, but for those who lived far back in history and prehistory.

Death statistics provide one indirect way to assess the misery of our ancestors. Although suffering cannot be measured directly, mortality statistics from disease, genocide, wars, starvation, natural disasters, and accidents make us aware of the mass suffering that many of us turn a blind eye to.

Some could argue that death per se is not an evil because they believe in a glorious afterlife. But death often entails prolonged and agonizing suffering, sometimes for years (not to mention the grief experienced by survivors).

And no one should argue that murder or genocide is not really evil (even if the perpetrators are in some way not fully responsible, such as being mentally ill, in which case they would share responsibility with God, who created them, and those who influenced them during their life).

The innocent victims' suffering would need to be justified by divine or karmic plans and the sheer number who meet the same end at the same time when disasters strike are hard to explain this way.

The Implications of Disease

Bubonic plague is a particularly awful disease transmitted to humans by infected fleas that pick it up from rats. Within a few days of exposure, people suddenly are covered with painful swellings, their toes, fingers, lips, and nose begin to rot from gangrene, they continuously vomit blood, and are in extreme pain. They are also very contagious. At least a third of Europe died in the 14th century from this, but the plague began in Asia and all told upwards of 200 million were killed by it.

This so-called Black Death also caused 40 to 100 million deaths in the 6th century across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

But this was not even the most deadly disease, according to the World Health Organization. Smallpox is believed to have occurred as far back as

10,000 B.C. and during the 20th century alone, killed 300-500 million (and caused one-third of all blindness) before it was officially declared eradicated in 1979.

Let us also consider some of the other major epidemics. Jared Diamond, in Guns, Germs, and Steel, estimates that 95% of the population of the Western Hemisphere died in the two centuries following Columbus' landing, due to a combination of European diseases. Conservatively, the pre-Columbian population was 30 million and some estimates are as high as 100 million.

Malaria caused as many as 250 million deaths just in the 20th century. A significant slowdown came after the discovery of the pesticide DDT in 1938. But worries about DDT causing cancer led to a U.S. ban in 1972 and a virtual global one by 1980.

However, a reevaluation of the evidence and the resurgence of malarial deaths after the ban led the World Health Organization to approve its use for indoor spraying in 2000. Critics of the ban argue that while it was in place, 50 million unnecessary malarial deaths occurred.

Measles may have killed 200 million in the past 150 years. Tuberculosis caused the deaths of 40 to 100 million just in the 20th century. The worldwide Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920 killed 75 million.

There is a simple reason these things happened: human beings did not know that "germs" (pathogens like bacteria or viruses) caused these and many other diseases until the experiments of Louis Pasteur in the 1860s. Although European surgeons finally adopted Joseph Lister's sterilization techniques by the 1870s, resistance by American doctors continued for two more decades.

But even after the causes of diseases were discovered, effective medicines were a long time in development, even though a benevolent God could have provided the answers. In the case of smallpox, simple sanitation was the foundation for eradication. How would not revealing this to mortals serve God's plans? How was this ignorance karmic justice?

According to Global Water, over a billion people lack safe drinking water

today. They also often do not have enough food, while water-borne parasites rob them further of nourishment. Some 80% of fatal childhood diseases can be attributed to contaminated water.

Then there is the disease which probably frightens more people in developed countries than anything else today. Cancer has plagued man since at least 3000 B.C., according to evidence from Egypt. In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared the "War on Cancer." According to Sourcewatch.org, $200 billion was spent on U.S. government and private research from that time through 1997 with little to show for it. The National Cancer Institute today has a $5 billion annual budget.

While there has been some improvement in the overall age-adjusted U.S. cancer mortality rate, this has been largely due to the successful campaign to stop smoking and early breast cancer detection, not any major new therapy (doctors' lack of optimism is shown by measuring successful treatment as simply enabling to patient to survive another five years). One in three Americans can expect to get cancer.

Today, NCI says cancer is the leading cause of death in developed countries and the second cause of death in developing nations, with a total of 12 million dying of cancer each year, with a rise expected due to environmental and other causes.

Then there are the congenital disorders, with 3-5% of births worldwide resulting in malformations. Few parents could afford the estimated $1 million needed for lifetime care of a child with cystic fibrosis. About 12% of adult hospital admissions are for genetic causes, a huge burden on the global health system.

The recent recognition that autism occurs in one in 88 births in the U.S. was a shock. A child afflicted with autism will require typically $67,000-$72,000 a year in therapy, beyond the means of most families (never mind those in less developed countries). The total annual cost to the U.S. is estimated at $137 billion.

What Religions Say

The Western notion that something valuable might have been learned from adversity is not convincing, since lessons are difficult to absorb when your consciousness is overwhelmed with misery. A loving Heavenly Father could have either intervened to alleviate pain, made our bodies less sensitive to it in the beginning, or provided treatments that would have made it more possible for these positive lessons to be gained from suffering

Bart Ehrman, in God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer, lays out the Good Book's explanations. Most of the Old Testament blames our suffering on disobedience to God's laws: good people do not get punished. This is reiterated in the New Testament. Jehovah, it implied, had given people enough freedom to be held responsible for using it to commit sin.

"The problem with this view is that it is outrageous and morally repugnant, but also that it creates both false security and false guilt," Ehrman wrote. He notes other Biblical explanations:

- God cannot prevent our adversities, but he gives us strength to get through them.
- Sometimes God can bring good out of evil.
- Suffering may allow a manifestation of his power (such as saving the Israelites from drowning in the Red Sea).
- The Jewish apocalyptic prophets saw the suffering of the innocent to be the result of demons.

According to some writers in the New Testament, only in an afterlife would justice be done when the evil would be tortured for eternity, a rather extreme remedy from a Heavenly Father who loves all his children.

Ehrman says that readers mistakenly think that in the story of Job, he either realizes his individual suffering is minor from a cosmic perspective, that he is

inherently guilty before God anyway, or that he is satisfied with at least getting a divine audience. “But God does not explain why Job suffers, he simply asserts that he is the Almighty and, as such, cannot be questioned,” notes Ehrman.

Ehrman thinks that the best Biblical explanation for most cases of suffering is found in Ecclesiastes: life can be unfair and absurd.

If we argue that diseases are built into nature, then the Almighty is either not all-good for allowing them, not all-powerful because he is unable to eliminate them, or not all-knowing because he should have foreseen the consequences of putting souls into material creation.

The Eastern idea of karma is not convincing, if only because it is difficult to imagine that everyone from the most innocent child to the most brutal ruler had to suffer natural calamities in essentially the same way, at the same time. That would mean that whatever they did in their prior lives required execution in this dramatic and often torturous way at that exact moment.

And what about all those other karmic debts they were supposed to pay off? If proponents believe this dilemma is easily solved by allowing them to be dispensed of in another life, that means the karmic mechanism was flawed in demanding repayment in a timely manner. The unpaid karmic bills would keep piling up, since few people would be able to live out their lives in such a way that every single debt was resolved. Over time, the backlog would keep building, locking the soul into endless reincarnations.

Natural Disasters and Accidents

As with disease, what we know about natural disasters—a tiny glimpse of what really has happened—does not support the religious belief that these events were part of a grand plan for those who were affected.

According to the Wikipedia’s “List of natural disasters by death toll,” as many as 43 million were killed by famine in China 1958-1961. Another Chinese famine in 1907 resulted in the deaths of 24 million. In 1876-1879, 13

million died from lack of food in northern China.

As far back as there are records, regional famines have resulted in the deaths of masses of people, from two million in Russia in 1601-1603 to 19 million in the British-ruled India of 1896-1902.

God or karma would have to be in complete control of weather and the fruitfulness of crops to achieve such an intended outcome. If not, then there are other reasons why these people died, such as poor quality of seeds, bad government planning, or drought, which have nothing to do with the individuals' morality or with divine purposes.

China was also the site of the two worst floods in history: one in 1931 killed as many as four million, while the one in 1887 caused the deaths of upwards of two million. It would appear, according to conventional religious thinking, that there have always been an awful lot of bad people in China who needed to learn some costly lessons, all at the same time.

Cyclones and hurricanes have caused major disasters, including the largest ever recorded, in what is now Bangladesh in 1970, when half a million died. Does that mean all those people have reincarnated and mended their behavior which led to this, which is why we have not had cyclones and hurricanes on that order since then?

The deadliest known earthquake happened in Shaanxi, China, in 1556, killing 830,000. The next worst occurred in Haiti in 2010, resulting in the deaths of 316,000. This prompts one to ask why natural disasters are localized; why is it everyone in one area must be promptly executed?

Yet we all recall one exception: the 2004 tsunami centered in Indonesia, which may have killed 310,000 people across southeast Asia, the worst of its kind in history. If reincarnation means people are improving themselves, why do these things keep happening?

But we are thinking too small if we just consider human history. The Permian-Triassic extinction about 250 million years ago wiped out 90% of all life, probably due to a comet, asteroid, or volcanic eruptions. Similar events

eliminating 20 to 70% of living things, occurred 440 million, 360 million, 200 million, and 65 million years ago (the latter clearing the earth of dinosaurs).

To assume these things were brought about by a supposedly perfect Deity means that he realized he had made major mistakes in trying to create the world and virtually had to start over. We do have the admission in the Bible that everyone and everything had to be wiped out by a divine flood that left only Noah's family and the creatures onboard the ark. That would mean God did not have the ability to foresee how things would turn out and thus, as the Bible says, "repented" of having made man.

Some might argue that prehistoric animal suffering should not considered, but Jeffrey Masson's When Elephants Weep documents that the more we know about animals, the more we have to recognize that many of them have similar feelings to the ones we humans share, especially the ability to feel physical and even emotional pain.

War and Genocide

Then there are those killed by wars. According to Wiki's "List of wars and anthropogenic disasters by death toll," World War II resulted in between 40 and 70 million deaths, with 55 million being closest to the consensus of scholars. That includes 17 million killed in the Nazi genocide.

Incredibly, the Mongol conquests of Asia resulted in 30-70 million killed, 17.1% of the world population at that time.

The Taiping Rebellion in China 1851-1864 resulted in the deaths of 20 to 100 million.

And who committed the largest genocides in the 20th century? According to Wiki, the champion was Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong (aka Mao Tse-tung), responsible for a total of as many as 70 million. In Frank Dikotter's Mao's Great Famine, using previously classified records, he argues that during the Great Leap Forward of 1958-1962 alone, 45 million

Chinese died in his campaign to force peasants to modernize.

An analysis of new records cited by Wiki yields about 20 million victims of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, including those who killed by mass executions, those who died in the gulag prisons, and forced famines as part of the drive for collective farming.

Some might respond that God gave those who commit genocide free will and they abused it, so they will be judged for their sins in the next life. But how can they really be held accountable after the fact, when no adequate compensation is possible for victims?

Religious theories that assert that individual suffering is an illusion, that there is no evil if properly understood in the context of the divine big picture, or that everything can be blamed on demons, are insults to the memories of those who have been slaughtered or tortured.

Then there are innumerable cases of manmade accidents that have led to death and suffering, from inadvertently starting wildfires to forgetting to check something important in building construction. None of these are due to an intention to do evil, but inflict great suffering nonetheless. What would be the appropriate punishment and how would it help victims?

The World Health Organization says that unintentional injuries are responsible for 57 out of every 100,000 deaths annually, making it number nine on the list of top causes (just ahead of HIV/AIDS). And then there is the sometimes lifelong suffering caused by non-fatal injuries.

WHO counted 1.24 million fatal motor vehicle accidents in 2010, 34,000 in the U.S., half of them pedestrians.

According to the American Medical Association, recognized side effects of prescription drugs result in the deaths each year of around 100,000 Americans.

Now multiply all the natural and manmade disasters that have befallen the 108 billion who have lived since modern humans emerged in southeast Africa 110,000 years ago (source: Population Reference Bureau). The suffering

becomes incomprehensible, starting with pain and death in child birth.

That most eloquent of Christian apologists, C.S. Lewis, argued in The Problem of Pain, that we cannot conceive of the true morality of the Almighty, that we are somehow complicit in the Fall of Adam and Eve that brought evil into the world, and that there is only individual pain, no grand composite of suffering that anyone feels. It is a valiant effort, but fails to justify so much.

In addition to the evidence that the God of tradition could not be good, also need to consider more carefully whether human beings can even be held accountable for doing evil.

Chapter Six

Are We Responsible for Doing Evil?

The notion that this life is a testing ground necessary for us to learn to choose to do good or evil is shared by religions East and West as the key to the meaning of life (Christians would say that the paramount good would be to accept Jesus as savior).

There are a number of problematic assumptions with this. For someone to be held fully accountable and assigned reward or punishment, there needs to be the ability to exercise “free will.”

For there to be meaningful choice for someone means that even if God had complete knowledge of the individual’s nature and influences, the action he or she might take must not be 100% predictable. Once something is inevitable, the ability to alter course by any means has been eliminated.

If someone were driving a car and the headlights were not adequate and a pedestrian was about to walk into its path, how predictable would the accident be for God? The difference between a 100% sure thing and 99.9% certainty is the free will gap.

The increasing evidence that our behavior is largely the product of DNA and our environment raises the question as to why God would create us to largely be automatons. It is not an adequate answer to say God waved a magic wand and declared us to be free, despite the restrictions.

If we are not truly free to act in a way that is not entirely predictable by an all-knowing God, then he has decided to amuse himself by making puppets.

But what is the source of the notion that God is all-knowing? The Bible, which, however, is very flawed, as we will discuss later. It seems likely that this was said simply to emphasize the awe-inspiring difference between human and divine knowledge, but it should not be taken as definite proof that God has known everything we were going to do from the beginning.

Calvinists and others who believe in predestination assert that God's will for us predetermines all human outcomes, including whether we will be saved in the next life. To assert that someone's behavior is perfectly predictable and yet he somehow has free will, is to redefine freedom as doing what one is programmed to do.

The irony of embracing this idea is that it would be a license to act in ways that would upset religious fundamentalists. Theft, murder, adultery, and taking drugs would already be in the hand of cards that God dealt you and no amount of your own effort could avoid your fate.

Of course, it is hard to understand why such a God should be worshipped. But this does not bother those who define as good, anything God wants to do.

An alternative interpretation of scriptural statements about God's omniscience and omnipotence was given by philosopher William James in The Dilemma of Determinism. He wrote that God does appear to be all-knowing and all-powerful to us, but he can actually only know what can be known and only do what is possible.

Of course, such a position is seen by fundamentalists as verbal sophistry that aims to minimize the greatness of God.

It should be added that whether one accepts a limitation on foreknowledge, scriptural prophecy would still be viable, since God could fulfill predictions given to his messengers about actions he intends to take, without this trampling on human freedom.

Neither East, Nor West Have Answers

But the Eastern idea of reincarnation also does not provide a solution to this dilemma. If we say our life circumstances are due to past behavior, that just pushes back the question about why we came into our first incarnation with certain traits.

The Eastern theory that each life gives the individual a new chance to work

out his or her personal karma makes little sense. Each person's karmic debt would have to be absolutely coordinated with everyone else's or things will not work out as intended.

For example, if you need to die in a car accident because in your prior life someone was killed when you drove drunk, then everything has to be controlled to that end, from whether you die from disease as an infant to whether you are born into a society that even has cars. World history has to revolve around that goal, never mind your other karmic debts and those of everyone else which need to be satisfied.

The complications that would occur from the messiness of real life and interaction with others and the processes of nature are not readily evident. We tend to think about our own lives without much reference to how everything we do is linked to the rest of humankind and everything else.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, there are the secularists who insist that all human behavior is completely predictable. Like believers in predestination, extreme behaviorists argue that all our actions are entirely programmed by nature.

This was the theory of the late behavioral scientist B. F. Skinner, who insisted that all human actions are the result of genetics and the biochemistry of the brain. We are biological robots and if we only knew everything, his acolytes insist, individual actions would be completely predictable.

Of course, we are not remotely close to that possibility: an enormous amount is still being researched about everything from whether the mind is entirely a function of the brain to the uncertain behavior of particles at the quantum level. Most scientists recognize that the complexity makes 100% certainly about anything highly unlikely, other than the operation of the basic laws of nature.

As with the idea of an omniscient Creator, the notion of an all-knowing scientist relies on the simplistic notion of someone who can look under a microscope at one situation and make an accurate prediction as to what will

happen, completely in isolation from everything else happening in the universe.

The Flow of Time

One fashionable theory about the ability to change our destiny tries to combine Eastern philosophical thought with modern physics to argue that there is freedom to act because there is no linear time. For example, Deepak Chopra, M.D., asserts in Ageless Body, Timeless Mind, that it is easy to turn back the clock in a timeless universe:

You perceive yourself as existing in time because your body is composed of change; to change, one must have a flow or sequence…a before and after… But quantum physics reveals about the most basic space-time events in Nature…that two particles can move backward in time as easily as forward; things that happened in the past can be altered by energy events in the future. The whole notion of time as an arrow shooting inexorably forward has been shattered forever in the complex geometrics of quantum space, where multidimensional strings and loops carry time in all directions and even bring it to a halt.

The only absolute left to us is the timeless, for now we realize that our entire universe is just one incident springing forth out of a larger reality. What we sense as seconds, minutes, days and years are cut-up bits of this larger reality. It is up to you, the perceiver, to cut up the timeless any way you like; your awareness creates the time you experience.

Let us be clear about what this is asserting: our ancestors did not live in caves before Dr. Chopra had his book published, that this is just a convenient way of looking at events. We can all time travel if we put our minds to it and, if we wanted, we could go back (if such a term is even useful) and prevent the Holocaust by killing Hitler (surprise: no one has actually tried to do this).

Ironically, by equating the future with the past, the attempt to make time seem malleable actually causes the future to appear already set, so that we

can intervene to change it.

Physicists like Stephen Hawing envision space-time as a sphere with no beginning or end. But in A Brief History of Time, he acknowledges that while the mathematical theory of time might allow flexibility in the direction of the flow, three fundamental laws only have an arrow of time that goes forward in this universe: “They are the thermodynamic arrow, the direction of time in which disorder increases; the psychological arrow, the direction of time in which we remember the past and not the future; and the cosmological arrow, the direction of time in which the universe expands, rather than contracts.”

Recently, physicist Lee Smolin, in Time Reborn, challenged thinking about time as something without real sequence: “Time is paramount and the experience we all have of reality being in the present moment is not an illusion, but the deepest clue we have to the fundamental nature of reality. If the laws of nature are outside time, then they’re inexplicable.”

But what about precognition or the ability to predict the future? Does that not imply that some aspects of the future can be foreseen by some people? There is nothing inherently opposed to individual free will in the existence of this capability, as long as no one is claiming that every detail must occur as envisioned. Having studied a number of well-known psychics closely, I can confirm that any fair-minded investigator is likely to reach the conclusion that very few are able to perform much above chance.

Can We Exercise Free Will?

The problem of omniscience and foreknowledge aside, do we have real free will, the ability to make decisions that are somewhat independent of our genes and environmental influences?

Wiki’s entry on “Free Will” lays out nine positions on whether anyone can make decisions that are not be entirely predetermined, according to the scheme of philosopher Galen Strawson. Strawson himself believes that the

argument for free will assumes an absurdity: that there is an origination for a particular chain of events, even though a mental state cannot be developed out of nothing.

To hear evolutionary biologist Allen MacNeill of Cornell University tell it in his Modern Scholar audio course Evolutionary Psychology, virtually all of his colleagues are adamant that there is no mind that is independent of the brain and all our decisions are entirely the products of biochemical reactions. Religion, he says, is just an evolutionary adaptation to possible threats by having a belief in an unseen protector.

Likewise, physicist Hawking has declared free will to be an illusion and atheism advocate Sam Harris, in Free Will, takes the same position.

But militant advocates of any ideology—religious, anti-religious, scientific, political—pat each other on the back in an ivory tower, refusing to fully acknowledge their close-mindedness about criticisms.

Quite a bit of the naturalistic theories that insist that brain chemistry and mind are the same base their arguments on functional magnetic resonance imaging—fMRI—scans of the brain. Yet psychiatrist Sally Satel and clinical psychologist Scott Lilienfeld have argued, in Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience, that the claims for boiling down human decisions to measurable brain chemistry are wildly overstated, given the fact that research has barely begun and has produced contradictory results.

Further developments in fMRI could eventually provide pictures of what is happening in the mind, but that would not resolve the debate over conflating it with the brain.

Shaun Nichols, in the Teaching Co. course Great Philosophical Debates: Free Will and Determinism, has a balanced discussion about the pros and cons of the many positions in this field.

A lot of creativity has been shown by philosophers trying to reconcile our subjective sense of being able to make our own decisions with the logical assumption that decisions have to be preceded by various influences.

The great 17th century philosopher of classical liberalism, John Locke, declined to take a metaphysical position about whether the will was truly free, but pragmatically observed that the defining feature of voluntary behavior was the ability to postpone a decision to reflect on the options and their consequences. The real question is whether the decision to mull things over is completely determined itself or can pondering choices change the outcome?

The humanist philosopher Daniel Dennett, in Elbow Room and Freedom Evolves, argues that the fact that in the physical universe everything has a cause is not to say that what happens is inevitable. Drawing on game theory and neuroscience, he says genetics provides various recipes to use while building up experience and awareness of alternative actions (after all, we share the same genes with more than 99 percent of other humans, despite our extremely variable behavior). Modern man, he states, has more freedom than a Neanderthal did because of our increasing ability to create new options.

One way to think about the freedom to make choices, he says, is to imagine an animal in a small cage at a zoo: it obviously has little freedom to do what it wants. But if it is given a new spacious habitat to roam, it has a many more options, regardless of limitations on free will. The tradeoff is not all or nothing between freedom and deterministic predictability, he argues.

The retired eminent philosopher Freeman Dyson has argued that “quantum mechanics makes atoms unpredictable and the human mind is a sort of clever device for using this freedom in order to achieve some kind of purpose.” In other words, the physical universe at the atomic level operates with a certain amount of randomness within the laws of nature, and within that space, the mind has evolved to make choices.

Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, in The Open Universe, theorized that hardline determinism cannot be true because the world of physical objects is impacted by the world of mental objects and events, including knowledge. The latter includes the development of scientific theories, which have

unintended consequences, he pointed out.

For example, each element of the development of the atomic bomb has a very long series of causes and interactions, each of which has seemingly endless dependencies. Even if one could control every aspect of events in Einstein's life until he devised the special theory of relativity, to predicted the outcome of the bombing of Japan, one would also have to control the political developments that led up to it, each of which would have a very long series of contingencies. It would be hard to seriously argue that the bombing itself did not change the fate of those affected.

The notion that the consequences of all scientific discoveries were just the inevitable unfolding of predictable history, that no will power was exercised that changed its course, would seem to be nothing more than dogmatic faith in an unproven theory.

In the volume Does Consciousness Cause Behavior?, one of the contributors, Walter Freeman, argued that the mind and neurological functions are tightly correlated in a way that feedback from actions is passed on the individual subsystems, such as neurons and their synapses, to create "self-organizing dynamics…between the behaving animal and its environment." So we can think of our free will as something about our core self that allows us to integrate feedback from experience to better guide our mind.

Likewise, proponents of the philosophy of "emergence of the will" view the mind as a property of the brain that has evolved to control the brain's lower functions.

Interestingly, experiments have shown that if people are exposed to information that convinces them they do not have free will, either because the universe is allegedly random or operates in a predetermined way, they become more aggressive, less helpful to others, and feel less guilt about transgressions against others. So, ironically, disbelief in free will creates a more negative outcome than belief would.

But free will aside, our personalities are to a great extent the result of our bodily systems. Mark Leary, professor of psychology and neurology at Duke University, notes that 30 -50% of neuroticism (inclination to negative emotions like fear and anxiousness) is due to genetics. This means that whatever the supposed intentions of God or karmic destiny, only part of this is hardwired, leaving the environment as a wild card for the individual's future.

That does not mean there is meaningful free will, but rather a lot of chance, which does not fit well with any grand plan.

Most religions would give the Creator the responsibility for having provided our bodies and minds with our essential personalities. If God is all-powerful and gave our souls true free will originally, he has to be held accountable for then throwing us into life circumstances that would radically alter how we turn out.

That said, prudence dictates that we act as if we have free will and follow our consciences. After all, it might actually make a difference if we rescued that drowning person.

Earth Life as Opportunity

There is another problem with the religious understanding of earth life as an opportunity for spiritual and moral growth: it is wildly inconsistent with the facts on the ground.

Humans have always had to spend most of their time concentrating on simple survival, making this a very poor laboratory for significant inner growth. Even under optimum conditions, a third of our lives is spent sleeping and most of the rest must be devoted to mundane matters, such as work or education for worldly goals. In our limited free time, few of us spend most of it in pursuit of the deepest truths.

Another complication that undermines the grand theory of spiritual evolution is that many of us are also affected by mental problems that

impinge on the ordinary circumstances of life. There are the 157 mental illnesses detailed in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the psychiatric handbook. A staggering 26% of Americans suffer from one or more, including the 90% of those who commit suicide (32,000 a year), 10% of those who commit homicide, 2.4 million with schizophrenia, one-half to 3.7% of females who at some point will suffer from an eating disorder, and the 4.5 million with Alzheimer's disease at any given time.

Reincarnation only results in multiplying the original dilemma. Were the Eastern theory true, there would presumably be a significant increase in the percentage of the population that is enlightened in modern India, where the positive impact of growth over multiple lives ought to be recognized. But having spent time there, I can assure you that no Indian of any religious persuasion asserts that their society is more spiritual today than any time in the past.

The importance of this life for personal development is complicated by the problem of early child death. As Tony Volk and Jeremy Atkinson noted in "Is Child Death the Crucible of Human Evolution?" (Journal of Social Evolutionary And Clinical Psychology 2008), in classical Greece and Rome the death rate for those less than one year old was 25-35%, with another 15-25% of children dying before puberty. The figures did not change much through the 18th century in Europe.

In the 1850s, the U.S. infant mortality rate was 217 per 1,000 births for whites and 340 for African Americans. Now it is an overall average of just seven. Is the difference likely now due to the need for fewer infants to die from bad karma or due to improved understanding of disease prevention?

But for those who survive infancy, the programming of thinking and behavior occurs very early, militating against spiritual growth later. As psychologist Harville Hendrix documents in Getting the Love You Want, we are all very heavily influenced at the earliest age by family and social values.

So even if each infant is born with a genetic inclination to take some action, this is influenced to a great extent by our culture. This is why it takes years of psychoanalysis for a patient to begin to understand how his or her subconscious causes irrational acts, often injurious to the self.

In any event, any divine or karmic life plan assumes that innumerable other things will have taken place in vast coordination to provide these positive opportunities for everyone throughout their lives. The more you think about it, the more improbable this seems. If this is true, however, it makes God or the karmic process seem engaged in a pointless game whose outcome is fixed.

For example, controls would have to stimulate the discovery of medicine to treat diseases that would otherwise kill the individual before his destined time. The invention of safety regulations would be necessary for someone to avoid being killed on the job too early. Or there would have to be divine intervention to prevent or instigate an earthquake, which would complicate the fate of everyone else involved.

Inevitably, the controls needed to benefit one person would conflict with another. And what would be the point of having everything so controlled, since this would largely eliminate meaningful free will?

On the other hand, if we deemphasize destiny, but believe we are here to try to live right, why are there so many conflicting ideas about how to do it? Why can we have so little real opportunity to know the truth independent of the culture we grow up in? We might think that as adults we are fully informed to exercise freedom of thought, but what about someone who grows up in rural India? How can one know whether it is imperative to eat kosher? Pray the rosary daily? Make a pilgrimage to Mecca?

The list of serious ethical issues that face the individual sincerely trying to do the right thing is long, including:

- Should abortion be legal up to three months, unless the mother’s health is endangered, or not at all?

- What kind of stem cell research is divinely sanctioned?
- What limits should there be on cloning?
- Should assisted suicide at the request of the severely suffering be allowed?
- Should one vote against gay marriage?
- Will God punish any kind of sex before marriage?
- Is capital punishment ever just or is it required for serious sins?

If we argue that we just have to follow our consciences, then morality is entirely relative to the society and there should be no divine or karmic punishment without that context.

If one believes there are some absolute moral laws, why did God not make these clear? Anyone who believes the Bible has done so has not faced the implications, such as the command that the Israelites stone disobedient children to death.

As for those who say the eight primary religious paths are headed for the same goals anyway, Stephen Prothero argues, in God Is Not One, that this shows a lack of knowledge about just how different their teachings are.

Why would a good deity make it so difficult to find the right path, let alone follow it? In fact, the idea that the Creator actually hinders us in finding truth fits with the overall picture of the realities of life on earth. It also harmonizes with the nature of God depicted in the Old Testament, starting with the creation story.

To complete the emerging picture of what God could be, we will next examine whether the major religions can tell us something useful about that. As we shall see, the closer you look, the bigger the questions become.

Part III

Traditional Religions Reconsidered

Chapter Seven

What Are the Problems With Buddhism?

For those who have become disillusioned with traditional Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, the religions that originated in Asia can be very appealing.

The Buddhist and Hindu traditions contain so many variations, there is pretty much one to fit almost any inclination in belief.

Want rigorous ritual to achieve mystical insight? Tibetan (aka Vajrayana) Buddhism would be the ticket.

Prefer a simple, ecstatic approach to liberation from the cycle of rebirth? Join the dancers dedicated to Lord Krishna.

But for those who put a higher value on truth than personal comfort or taste, all of the Eastern spiritual paths raise more questions than they answer (not the least of which is why their theories about here and the hereafter contradict each other).

These are not issues that are easy to recognize by members of each tradition, since they tend to talk among themselves and are often not informed enough to answer questions from outsiders (I base this conclusion on having discussed these with scholars and ordinary believers around the world).

I am going to cite the Complete Idiot's and Dummies guides to highlight the issues for a couple of reasons (besides being readily available). One is because the most sophisticated sources tend to obscure the problems of the theology with a cloud of excessive and irrelevant intellectual detail.

Second, these introductory books are written by recognized authorities and carefully edited, with around 400 pages of clear explanations for non-experts (the humor can be flippant, but also be revealing). Wikipedia also generally has more or less objective summaries of the spectrum of belief in each tradition.

The first problem with Buddhism is that we do not have reliable sources on either his life or teachings. A less than ringing endorsement about this comes from religious historian Karen Armstrong in Buddha: “It is obviously difficult to write a biography that meets modern criteria because we have very little information that can be considered historically sound…but we can be reasonably confident that Siddhatta Gotama did indeed exist and that his disciples preserved the memory of his life and teachings as well as they could.”

Let us assume that the highlights of his life are accurately remembered. Siddhartha (or Siddhatta) was a prince of the Hindu warrior caste in what is now Nepal. He was born in 563 BC and became disturbed after encountering suffering outside of his comfortable world for the first time when he was 29.

He renounced his privileged life to go on the road to find the truth about the nature and purpose of life. After achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at 35, disciples gathered around him and preserved his teachings until his death in 483 (I have been to the site where he first explained his ideas at Sarnath, India, and discussed his philosophy with the staff).

But even in his lifetime, the meaning of his teachings was vigorously debated among followers. The Buddha often refused to be drawn into metaphysical speculation, preferring to focus on practical application of his ideas, leaving many philosophical questions unanswered.

Buddhists do agree that he taught that all suffering comes from attachment to the things of this world. Spiritual living can lead to detachment from such desires, extinguishing the impulse that would otherwise lead to reincarnation (achieving this state of “nirvana” thus ends the individual’s rebirth).

Meditation is used to calm the mind and care is taken to cultivate right thoughts and take right actions.

Three months after the Buddha’s death, the First Council convened to recall his teachings. According to this oral tradition, it divided them into three “baskets”: the first was a collection of discourses about practices to lead an

enlightened life; one was for the 225 rules to guide monks; the last was the Buddha's analysis of the nature of mental and physical reality.

A Multitude of Buddhisms

The oldest account of the Buddha's life and teachings, known as the Pali Canon, was written B.C. 88-29, and the oldest extant type of Buddhism, Theraveda, bases its conservative philosophy on this.

But Pali is not the language the Buddha spoke, so this raises questions about the accuracy of the transition from oral transmission. Also, Theraveda is only one of the 18 earliest Buddhist traditions (as Wiki notes, serious schisms appeared B.C. 450-250).

Today, there are about 124 million Theravedans, concentrated in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Yet despite its antiquity, Theraveda is the minority path of Buddhists today.

There are about 500 million adherents of the Mahayana tradition (differences in estimates of the number of Buddhists in each path are due to trying to measure primary loyalty, given the Asian tendency to mix a variety of religious beliefs and practices).

Mahayana's original scriptures were written B.C. 100-100 A.D., but many of its sects developed their distinct philosophies many centuries later in the areas where they are concentrated today, in China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Although Mahayana is quite diverse, Tibetan Buddhism is sufficiently distinct to qualify as the third major version. It was formed when Mahayana spread from India to Tibet in the 8th century, combining there with the native Bon animism and developing its own unique mystical philosophy. It has about 20 million believers.

One might wonder how the numerous and often contradictory Mahayana traditions could claim to be closer to the truth than Theraveda, since their

own scriptural sources originated many centuries later (the essence of the Pali Canon is believed to go back to the councils after the Buddha's death). There are two answers Mahayana proponents provide.

One is to claim that the Buddha secretly provided the full truth to only a few disciples who were ready to receive what the masses could not accept at the time. This is believed to have been passed down secretly by oral tradition until it was written down (although it is not clear why a large group of people would be more prepared for the full truth 400-500 years later).

Also, the even later Mahayana traditions are said to have been revealed direct from Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the heavens (bodhisattvas are those who delayed their ascension to Buddhahood to help others on earth and continue to intervene). Mahayana did not even influence Buddhism in India until 400-500 A.D.

Whatever one thinks of those claims, the wide appeal of Mahayana is obviously rooted in its fundamental difference with Theraveda. Theraveda sticks to an interpretation of the Pali scriptures that makes liberation from rebirth most likely for monks (with the average Buddhist gaining good karma by supporting them).

But Mahayana, known as the Great Vehicle, offers a way for the masses to attain this with simple rituals, like repeating a mantra (along with right living and thinking).

Mahayana Divisions

But if you accept Mahayana as the true path Buddha intended, you come up against the huge differences between the many groups in that tradition. Some of the most prominent:

- Nichiren Shoshu of Japan promises liberation to those who chant its "namu myoho renge kyo" mantra, which is popular with Westerners (though the appeal has been complicated by a recent split between the priests and the laity, the latter starting the Soka Gakkai movement). The

founder of Nichieren, incidentally, declared other forms of Buddhism to be inspired by demons.

- Chinese Pure Land claims to have been revealed by Amitabha, known as the Buddha of Infinite Light, a transcendental being who was once a bodhisattva and created a mystical realm where all people and things would eventually dwell who have complete faith in Amitabha. He is essentially the Buddhist version of a Jesus who can save anyone who is willing to accept his as the savior. Closely associated is Avalpokiteshvara (or Kuan-yion), another bodhisattva, who is an intermediary for mortals who pray to Amitabha, similar to the way Catholics view the Virgin Mary.
- A variation on Pure Land, Jodo Shinshu has more followers in Japan than any other Buddhist denomination. It claims that all beings are already enlightened and there is nothing anyone needs to do except express gratitude to Amitabha.
- Zen was taken from India to China, but now thrives primarily in Japan and the West. It claims a "special transmission" from the Buddha to Mahakashyapa. It emphasizes using intensive meditation to realize that there is no difference between the individual and the rest of the world, the "non-dual experience."

Tibetan Buddhism also has many variations, with practitioners following a teacher to learn how to use complex rituals to attain enlightenment, including chanting, music, meditating on diagrams (mandalas), tantric sex, and visualization of a deity, with whom one is to identify.

Just as liberal Christians dismiss the differences between radically different denominations (such as Calvinists and Jehovah's Witnesses), Buddhist intellectuals make light of Buddhism's variations. Yet the truth cannot be simply a matter of picking whatever fits one's preferences, since the teachings contradict each other. Most adherents just accept the particular strand of belief and practice they grow up with (you will not find many

Nichiren devotees in Tibet).

If the Buddha brought enlightenment to humanity, why so much confusion among his followers?

In or out of Buddhism, to assert that there is a greater amount of truth in one system compared with others is often frowned on (except by evangelical Christians, who warn those who do not accept Jesus as their savior that they will go to hell). Yet not seriously debating the differences does not help people move towards the truth.

Adding to Buddhism's insulation from serious criticism is its respectability among intellectuals across the spectrum of religion and philosophy. The apparent lack of dogmatism, the variety of belief systems to choose from, and the focus on practical benevolence are appealing.

Even atheists like it because the Buddha never said there was either an afterlife or a God, even though many Buddhists treat him like one, pray to bodhisattvas, and believe in supernatural realms.

But I believe Buddhist philosophy, regardless of the school, has some significant weaknesses in its interrelated issues of the nature of the soul, reincarnation, the ability of humans to achieve enlightenment, and the cause of suffering.

The No Self

The respected American philosopher Ken Wilbur articulates the tradition's radical view of the self and what actually reincarnates in "Death, Rebirth, and Meditation" (in What Survives? edited by Gary Doore):

It is very difficult to support the idea of reincarnation by appealing to 'evidence' in the form of alleged past-life memories, because in most cases these can be shown to be only a revival of subconscious memory trace from this life. It is the soul, not the mind, that transmigrates. Specific memories, ideas, knowledge, and so on belong to the mind and do not transmigrate.

Perhaps a few memories can sneak through every so often, but these would be the exception (only Buddhas or their incarnations as tulkus, it is said, can remember past lives).

Buddhism's idea is that the individual soul has only a temporary existence. There is an illusion of separateness from the Absolute that dissolves when the Absolute is directly experienced. In the "highest Tantra teaching," there exists at the very center of the heart chakra, in each individual, an "indestructible" drop that transmigrates, the mind of enlightenment or one's spiritual essence.

So the individual is just a temporary collection of karma that somehow holds together during transmigration and contains the programming dictating what will happen in the next life.

In Buddhism for Dummies, written by Jonathan Landaw (former translator for the Dalai Lama) and Stephan Bodian, the radical notion of the "no self" that is somehow responsible for its fate is emphasized, if not clarified:

On many occasions, Buddha said that your mind creates, shapes, and experiences everything that happens to you, without a single exception. This is the small mind, the analytical, conceptual mind that tends to identify itself as a limited, separate ego or self. According to Zen, big mind or Buddha Mind pervades the whole universe. Everything you experience is nothing other than this Mind.

When the illusion of a separate self dissolves, only nirvana remains. There's no longer any tendency to protect a separate me, because it's clearly seen that such a me has never existed, except as a collection of passing thoughts and feelings.

This interpretation of Buddhism shares a philosophical "unqualified monism" with Advaita Vedanta, the most radical branch of Hinduism, which says that there is nothing in the universe but the Absolute.

But if the Absolute is an ideal and undivided state, why is it having this schizoid dream of separateness? If we are not really individual spirits, why

should we be exhorted to make an effort to overcome this illusion?

The evidence for spirits in Chapter Three suggests that something more than “magnetized karma” does survive.

But some Buddhists would argue that everything is an illusion anyway. They also like to say “the truth is beyond logic,” which is very useful when one is backed into a philosophical corner. This stance received support from the Buddha, who avoided taking clear positions on metaphysical issues (“the truth is neither this nor that,” he would say, which explains nothing).

Buddhists who are challenged about the credibility of the No Self will often move the goal posts by arguing that the statement that there is no individual self was just the Buddha’s effort to keep people from becoming too attached to their ego.

But how does it accomplish that better than simply admonishing people not to become attached to temporary things? At best, it is confusing, which is why the average Buddhist ignores the idea in practice. After all, the Buddha exhorted them to think and do right and what would be the point if the separate self were truly an illusion?

The Illusive Illusion

Dummies attempts to dispel the “misconception that Buddhists think that everything is an illusion”:

Buddhist texts compare the world of appearances to an insubstantial dream, mirage, or illusion. Some people mistakenly interpret this metaphor to mean that nothing actually exists, that things are just a figment of your imagination, and that what you do really doesn’t matter because nothing makes sense anyway.

Things aren’t illusions: they’re like illusions. They appear to exist in one way but, in fact, exist in another way. In the same way, reality may appear to be a collection of solid, separate, material objects. In fact, however, it is a

constantly changing flow, in which everything is interrelated and nothing is as separate or independent as it appears to me.

So, the big revelation is that material things are made up of energy? If there is no difference between Buddhism's No Self and our awareness that we change, why should this even be discussed?

In case anyone is thinking the No Self just sounds like common sense, Dummies explains that because there is nothing we would call a self that reincarnates: "There is no one who dies and no one who is reborn!"

Some assert that the individual has a kind of reality as a part of the Absolute, like a wave is part of the ocean. But then who is causing the wind to create the wave and why? Either you believe all things are truly one (even if the one is suffering from a delusion of separateness) or you believe in a qualified dualism, that things are connected, but not exactly the same thing.

I think the fundamental argument that a changing self cannot be a "real" self is flawed. Buddhists are fond of noting that you are not exactly the same person at 60 that you were at 10. Yet even your body completely changes all its cells every seven years, the one you have now has the same DNA as when it was born. The same personality can recall memories from childhood, even though many have accrued since then.

The sun also constantly changes, but we do not say that this means there is no continuity between the sun four billion years ago and today.

Nirvana and Suffering

Buddhism defines nirvana as the elimination of desire, which causes attachment that leads to suffering. Some have pointed out that the original term, "dukkha," has a broader meaning than suffering, including having anxiety and being frustrated.

But how does attachment address suffering caused by earthquakes or malaria or war? Having a good attitude, if that is what not being attached

means, is a plus, but it does not go far in explaining why seemingly innocent people suffer from disasters.

According to the great Mahayana teacher Vasubandhu, who established the influential Yogacara school of thought in 4th century Pakistan, the only thing that exists are mental constructs. Our perceptions are entirely projections of our minds, and karmic suffering is merely due to imagined guilt.

Does this mean that the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust were imagining it? Or that Hitler was an agent of their karma?

Did all of the 200 million worldwide who died from the Black Death in the 14th century fantasize this, or did they need to suffer in the same gruesome way at the same time, even the children?

Some Mahayana philosophers would go further, asserting that everyone is already enlightened. This would mean there is no difference between the Holocaust and nirvana, except spiritual awareness. Or that Tibet before the Chinese invasion and now is the same; if Buddhists there feel oppressed, they simply need to wake up, not resist.

Furthermore, if Buddhism were a realistic path to spiritual liberation, why do so few Buddhists (never mind the rest of humanity throughout history) claim to be close to achieving nirvana? After all, through all these thousands of years of incarnations, one would expect to see some very positive results, if rebirth led to self-improvement.

And lest anyone think that Buddhist leaders in the real world have a spotless record of humanitarianism, it is worth knowing that from medieval Burma to Imperial Japan and today in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, practitioners of the faith have had no problem reconciling their faith with military violence.

Chapter Eight

What Are the Problems With Hinduism?

There are an estimated one billion Hindus following thousands of sects, almost all in India. While they use the same sacred texts, interpretation varies widely. Naturally, intellectual liberals downplay the differences, but cannot betray their own prejudices.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism by Linda Johnsen provides one example, in her defense of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of the teacher Shankara, who lived somewhere between 600 and 800 A.D. (lest anyone think she is merely providing objective commentary, she adds that he was "one of those staggering geniuses the world too rarely sees—not just a brilliant intellectual, but a highly advanced yogi with a living experience of the unity of all reality").

"It's not true that Hindus believe the world is 'just an illusion.' Shankaracharya, the famous master who is supposed to have taught this, in fact admitted that the world is fully real to those of us living in it," she wrote. "It appears like an illusion only from the point of view of enlightened awareness and finally disappears. The consciousness from which the universe was projected is the real reality, he said, not the ever-changing world."

In other words, he did not teach the world is an illusion, just a temporary fantasy. But let us cite a more scholarly source to confirm Shankara's teachings on this point, Readings in Vedic Literature: The Tradition Speaks for Itself by Satsvarupa dasa Goswami. Concerning Shankara's view that the only reality is Absolute Truth or Brahman, the transcendent consciousness: "Maintaining that the material world has no reality, Shankara stated, 'Brahman is real; the universe is false. He denied that the Absolute Truth is responsible for the material cosmos. He said that if the Absolute Truth extended into the universes and all-pervading souls, his original nature would

change. Since the Absolute Truth must be changeless, he cannot expand."

Contrary to those who try to minimize differences in ideology, Shankara said that "a person not belonging to this tradition has to be denounced like a fool," according to Wiki's "List of Teachers of Advaita Vedanta."

The Shankara version of Hinduism became the best-known form in the West because the early popularizers of the religion came from that tradition. The first was Swami Vivekananda, who spoke at a religion conference in Chicago in 1893, and Paramahansa Yogananda, author of Autobiography of a Yogi, who settled in the U.S. in 1920.

While most Western-born Hindus embrace Shankara's school, this is not the philosophy of the majority in India. Based on the debate in the West, one would not even know that Shankara was only one of the three major Advaita philosophers, who strongly disagreed with each other.

Nor are these matters of "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin"—these cut right to the core of the debate over how we can know what is real, the nature of God, and our responsibilities to achieve spiritual advancement.

Is Everything Actually Just One Thing?

Other Advaita philosophers argued that individual spirits (jivas) were not merely dreams of the Absolute, but had a separate existence.

Ramanuja, around 1000 A.D., asserted that while individual souls can experience a sense of union with Brahman through mystical experience, they do not actually merge with the Absolute when they achieve enlightenment. Jivas share the same substance with Brahman and the material world is an extension of Brahman, but jivas have own real existence.

Madhva, who taught about 1200 A.D., firmly argued that jivas were created by Brahman to eternally retain their separate existence, even after enlightenment. Once they not longer needed to incarnate on earth, they would

live in another transcendent world in blissful relationship with the Absolute.

How did Ramanuja and Madhva respond to Shankara's claim that his view was based on mystical experience? Other yogis had felt that sense of union, but had gone beyond it. These unification experiences were only passing phenomena because afterwards, they pointed out, Shankara and his followers returned to their earthly identities.

Furthermore, Goswami cites the Vaishnava theists, from the largest sect in India, that Brahman "could never fall into the illusion of material identity because 'if I am Brahman, the greatest, why am I covered in ignorance?' In denying the plurality of all jivas, Shankara differed from all orthodox Vedic schools."

Goswami notes that Shankara accepted only the impersonal nature of Brahman as a Supreme Being, what the Vedas speak of as "the all-pervasive aspect of the Absolute, the multifarious manifestations of the cosmos," with no attributes even a mystic can describe. But other early Hindu thinkers identified two other aspects of Brahman.

One was Paramatma, the Supersoul seated in the hearts of all jivas, who guides the actions of the created beings and can be perceived in yogic trance. "Paramatma manifests the knowledge aspects of the Absolute," wrote Goswami.

The other was Bhagavan, the Supreme Personality of Brahman. "Bhagavan is the full embodiment and Impersonal Brahman is to Bhagavan as sunshine is to the sun," wrote Goswami. "Real liberation is for the jiva to attain his original spiritual identity, for in his eternal form, the jiva can associate with Bhagavan. By rejecting Bhagavan, the Shankarites have created a subtle form of atheism garbed as Vedic knowledge."

Of course, if God is a person, he carries the moral problem of having created massive suffering in this world.

Physics and Eastern Philosophy

Despite most Hindus rejecting the most radical Advaita interpretation of the Vedas that insists that the material world is an illusion and that there is no individual spirit existence, some Western thinkers have embraced these ideas.

Michael Talbot, in The Holographic Universe, cites physicist David Bohm's theory of the implicate order of the universe to support the Buddhist and Advaita idea of all things being one: "It is as meaningless to view the universe as composed of parts as it is to view the different geysers in a fountain as separate from the water out of which they flow. Despite the apparent separateness of things…everything is a seamless extension of everything else…Look at the dog resting at your feet. You are the same thing…One enormous something which has extended uncountable arms… into all objects."

Talbot then summarizes recent brain research and the work of physicist Karl Pribram this way: "The objective world does not exist, at least not the way we are accustomed to believing. What is 'out there' is a vast ocean of waves and frequencies and reality only looks concrete to us because our brains are able to take this holographic blur and convert it into…sticks and stones." He cites physicist Nick Herbert, who wonders whether the material world is just "a radically ambiguous and ceaselessly flowing quantum soup" which freezes into "reality" when we look.

Amit Goswami, in The Self-Aware Universe, responds to critics who ask how cosmic reality could have existed for 15 billion years prior to conscious observers: "The cosmos never appeared in concrete form and never stays fixed in form. Past universes cannot be seen like paintings on canvases from which present events unravel with time. The universe exists as formless potential in myriad possible branches in the transcendent domain and becomes manifest only when observed by conscious beings."

The radical theorists seem to have forgotten that machines have taken photographs of the ancient universe.

All of this speculation is based on several famous experiments. One shows

that atoms that are distant from each other are in some way connected. Another indicates that light is both particle and wave, which defies common sense.

The third shows that at the quantum level we are unable to measure position and movement; it appears that observation affects what we are seeing. Canadian astrophysicist Hugh Ross, in The Creator and the Cosmos, responded that the "uncertainty principle" involved is due to our inability to understand quantum mechanics fully. But uncertainty about position and movement approaches zero when applied to macro objects, the visible world, he wrote.

Perhaps experimental patience and humility is called for, rather than a rush to embrace philosophies that fly in the face of the evidence that there really is a universe out there (which is still largely a mystery, so we ought to be prudent in speculating).

We could also test out the radicals' theories by staying in bed and just imagining our work is being done and that we will still get paid.

And what about the person who knows nothing of viruses, yet gets killed by them?

Reincarnation

The idea of reincarnation—that one can repeatedly reembody until the soul gradually becomes more spiritual—is very appealing. Why should our ability to improve our lot be limited to the vagaries of one mortal existence?

But closer analysis reveals significant problems with this. To start with, what is the evidence that reincarnation is actually in operation? To hear believers tell it, many people can recall their past lives, whether consciously or under hypnosis.

Johnsen admits that most people actually do not remember prior lives, but has an explanation: "At the moment of rebirth, the infant takes its gulp of air

and becomes a breathing being. This jolts the brain and subtle body, causing a force called vaishnava shakti to act. In most people, it cuts off detailed memories of the past life. It also cuts off detailed memories of this life, which is why most people don't remember much of current life either. The soul is still completing its 'hook up' to the new physical brain, and not all the data from the previous life is downloaded."

But lack of evidence is not evidence. But what about all those people who, one way or another, claim to remember their prior incarnations? Proponents say that the kind of detailed recall with their background stories could not simply be the result of their imagination.

Yet everyone has dreams each night, in which a wild fictional tale is cooked up out of bits of facts by the subconscious.

Proponents also point to "past lives" remembered under hypnotic regression, often cited in magazines and books about reincarnation?

Even the late pro-reincarnation researcher Dr. Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, Va., admitted: "A hypnotized person resembles that of a person dreaming. The subconscious parts of the mind are released from ordinary inhibitions and they may then present in dramatic form a new 'personality'…In fact, however, nearly all such hypnotically evoked 'previous personalities' are entirely imaginary, just as are the contents of most dreams."

In Secondary Identity Enactments During Hypnotic Past Life Regression, researchers at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, described their controlled experiments with 175 subjects. These responded to whatever they thought was wanted of them by the hypnotists (regression hypnotists attract customers who want to know about their past lives and are suspected of encouraging such recall).

But when details of their "past lives" were later checked, they turned out to have been gleaned from media exposure or travel or were actually inaccurate. In most such stories, the details simply cannot be checked.

The spate of bogus charges of “repressed memories” of widespread child molestation and satanic cults in recent decades underscore the unreliability of using hypnosis for recall of actual events, as discussed in Making Monsters: Psychotherapy, False Memories and Sexual Hysteria by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters.

Rogo Raises Questions

Scott Rogo, in The Search for Yesterday: A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Reincarnation, did a systematic and objective analysis of reincarnation anecdotes and found virtually all of them to have critical weaknesses. For example:

- People claim to remember a past life, when the individual they claim to be is still alive.
- They recall details of the lives of two deceased people as if they were one.
- Accurate memories are often mixed with incorrect ones.
- Cryptomnesia or unconscious learning is often the source of information to build the story. One subject under hypnosis was able to sing in Old English, but it was later learned that he had studied a book of ancient songs at a library. The mind absorbs everything it is exposed to and can place bits of this into tales that seem like memories.

Researchers have come up with theories to explain the occasional case involving largely accurate memories:

- Since most cases claim to be of people in the immediate area, memories are released at death as an energy that could be absorbed by a fetus of a local mother.
- A shared genetic pool could pass on some memories from the same culture.
- A “psi-informational complex residue” left behind at the time of death could be telepathically accessed by anyone.

- Jung's "collective unconscious" could allow information to be accessed that was not gained from an individual's own life.
- Mormons claim to have experiences interacting with ancestors and angels who inform them that the sense of a prior life is not based on an earthly one, but "the preexistence," a time in heaven before God sent each spirit into a mortal body. Some who follow the Jewish Kabbalah also believe in a prior spiritual existence.
- There are numerous examples of spirits claiming to be the Virgin Mary, Angel Gabriel, or Uncle Joe. so some may be motivated to project their own earthly experiences or made-up details into the minds of mortals. In extreme cases, this could involve possession. Hindu swami Sri Sri Somasundara Desika Paramachariya, a believer in reincarnation, wrote Dr. Stevenson to say, "All the 300-odd cases reported by you do not in fact support the theory of reincarnation…They are all spirit possessions, ignored by the learned in south India."

What about birthmarks that allegedly show how the person was killed, such as someone who "remembers" being hanged, then reincarnated with a red mark on the neck? Loyd Auerbach, in Reincarnation, Channeling and Possession argues that these are normal birthmarks being put into a story context. They could also appear in response to the above-mentioned imprinting of the fetus. But what would be their point and why do most people not show physical evidence of their prior death?

Living Out Karma

Assuming reincarnation is a fact, where could all of the current spirits have come from? The total number of births in human history is assessed by experts to have been about 70 billion, with 7.1 billion alive now. That would be an average of 10 past lives per person.

Yet supporters of the concept recall many more than that, with an average of 20 (almost all in recent history), according pro-reincarnation researcher Dr.

Joel Whitton, cited in Life After Death by Tom Harpur. Stevenson found an average in his cases of 12. Auerbach says estimates are from three to several thousand. Since world population did not reach one billion until 1804, that would mean that most spirits were refusing to reincarnate for hundreds of years.

This is odd, given supporters' claim that, as Johnsen says, "to be reborn into human bodies is a great blessing, since they are far more capable than animal and plant bodies of devoting themselves to spiritual life." This raises several questions:

- Why did it take hundreds of millions of years for evolution to get to the point of the first humans, who could show evidence of religion?
- What good deeds did lice do to get them up to the point where they could be reborn as humans? And did the Absolute start them as microbes and they improved themselves or did they commit misdeeds as dogs, getting them moved back down the chain?
- If almost all the vast number of living things are microbes, insects, or plants, can reincarnation be said to be viable when only the tiniest sliver of these become human?
- What happened to all those innumerable animal and plant spirits that became extinct? Some would respond that these came and went between other worlds or dimensions, which only pushes back the issue of origins and widens the chain of reincarnation, rather than solving the math problem.
- Did all the dinosaurs killed in the mass extinction 66 million years ago suffer from the identical karma?
- If reincarnation is a fact, why do advocates disagree on whether people were once animals or plants or whether everything is just a dream of Brahman?

Even the medium George Anderson, who believes in reincarnation, wrote in We Are Not Forgotten that when he asked the spirits about reincarnation,

they said they had only heard it was true. If the dead are unsure, perhaps the truth is being withheld for some reason.

It should also be noted that given the high historic infant mortality rate, most of these incarnations would have failed to impart any particularly helpful lessons.

If you go back to Chapter One, we documented that most human beings have lived short lives under miserable conditions. Although few reincarnationists recall past lives in the Third World, population growth suggests that this would have to have been the destination for most rebirths.

It is fair to ask whether the theory could be said to work well when very few people could do more than spend all their time just trying to survive, suffering famine, natural disasters, and diseases.

Even now, the odds are that a rebirth would mean the individual would simply be taking on a new set of mental, physical, environmental, educational, and even religious disadvantages, depending on one's viewpoint. A Hindu family recognizes the need for a vegetarian diet, yogic meditation, and worship of deities; it would regard someone born as a Christian having disadvantages. Rebirth is karmic Russian roulette, likely to result in a setback, rather than a new opportunity to pull oneself up by spiritual bootstraps that American reincarnationists imagine.

Yet the challenge is even greater than the individual bad karma to be worked off in the current life, as Johnsen explains:

Most human souls have an immense amount of karma built up from many previous existences. Due to the constraints of time and space, only a small portion of it can manifest in any one lifetime…But a lot of karma playing out through our lives is not personal, it's group karma.

Companies may feel free to pollute the environment. A child who developed in utero in a toxic neighborhood may be born handicapped. It's not necessarily that the child deserved this, it's that a culture has karmically invited the birth of genetically damaged children.

Yet if karma is supposed to impose justice, the interpretation Johnsen provides thwarts that.

Hinduism's ritual also raises another awkward question: why should bad karma—say, murdering someone—be alleviated by chanting or making offerings to deities?

Cosmic Complications

Reincarnation and karma also complicate an already impossible process of how to engineer one individual's life so that the appropriate karmic results play out, in this or any life.

As we discussed in Chapter Six, it is easy to think vaguely about someone's fate in the incredibly complicated real world: "He killed someone and escaped being executed, so he'll need to be murdered in the next life."

But if God, karma, or a universal computer program can project what will happen with 100% accuracy, that means there is no possible alternative outcome, no free will that can actually make a difference.

Yet if there is not absolute certainty, then a wild card has been introduced that can lead to unexpected outcomes for each situation, thwarting karma. Kicking it to the backlog is not a serious answer.

But establishing the inevitability of an event requires everything around it to be in sync. An individual who is supposed to become a great inventor cannot die in childhood of poor sanitation or in car accident before he achieves his goals. That person needs a leader who recognizes his or her talent and gets the inventor hired and promoted. Everyone else's fate would have to revolve around that individual for that one bit of karmic destiny.

Meanwhile, all the other seven billion people need their karma fulfilled. Each time one piece of this vast jigsaw puzzle is moved, it affects every other one. It is an impossible game for even a God to play.

But if it were true, then the karmic process carries with it the same ethical

burden as the all-powerful God of the Old Testament. Americans living in the comfortable 21st century should not facilely say that all those mass deaths from disease were just necessary steps in spiritual growth.

We pose the same question we asked about Buddhism: if reincarnation and karma worked as they are supposed to, why are advocates unable to point to more than a handful of people now living now who could be said to be so enlightened that they no longer need to reincarnate? When I was in India, no one I spoke to could provide an answer.

Next, we will consider how well Western monotheists—adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—can stand up under a fair scrutiny that does not immediately dismiss their supernatural claims.

Chapter Nine

What Are the Problems With Judaism and Islam?

Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a theological basis in their belief in the God of the Hebrew Bible (aka Tanakh or Old Testament) and his prophets, such as Abraham and Moses. Conservative Jews might not pronounce his sacred name (some translations render it as Yaweh), Christians call him Jehovah or God the Father, while Muslims refer to him as Allah.

They also accept the divine inspiration of the later prophets of the people of Israel, who wrote scripture or were written about (the remnant today of the 12 tribes of Israel are known as Jews, after the name of the primary tribe, Judah, which survived the Assyrian captivity of the 8th century B.C.).

Hence, with their intertwined histories and philosophies, we will consider these together. Judaism will come first, as the foundation for the others. Islam will follow, despite its later place in the chronology, because has more theological similarities to traditional Judaism than Christianity.

Christianity will get its own separate analysis, because is a tougher challenge, due to both complicated issues and because most readers grew up in its culture, which makes it more difficult to understand objectively.

JUDAISM

Today there are 14 million born Jewish or who are converts to Judaism, with 60-70% considering themselves religious, demonstrated either by membership in a place for religious services or because of personal observance, according to estimates by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (so 8.4-9.8 million religious). About half of the religious identify with the Orthodox tradition.

Judaism is thus by far the smallest group of the world's most important religions (by comparison, there are also around the same number of Mormons

or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). But it holds this position, despite its size, because of its foundational relationship with Christianity and Islam and also because it has influenced the values Western civilization.

Judaism has been developed by the rabbis over the past 2,000 years into a highly ethical system, stressing justice, truth, and compassion. As the recipients of some of history's worst persecutions, Jews have found inspiration in adversity from their religion. But the Nazi Holocaust that killed six million innocent victims made many of them lose their faith completely.

Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner wrote Making Sense of Suffering: A Jewish Approach to make the case that Jews should recognize God's omnipotence and take comfort in his expressed love, even if they do not understand why specific suffering occurs. It could be:

- Punishment for individual transgressions.
- Collective punishment regardless of whether certain individuals were guilty ("transgressions of German Jews before World War II resulted in the deaths of righteous Polish Jews during the Holocaust").
- A way for people to grow spiritually.
- God temporarily relinquishes his involvement in human history as the end time approaches.

"We cannot understand all of God's reasons for inflicting suffering," he wrote. "Suffering is a painful invitation to deepen our faith and make it a real part of our lives."

It is true that important lessons can be drawn from painful experiences, but that is gaining meaning where others in the same situation might not. Do young children who suffer from diseases or are killed in natural disasters really need to be schooled in this way? Kirzner insists on faithful acceptance that God is both good and all-powerful.

Conservative Rabbi Harold Kushner took a different approach in the

bestselling book When Good Things Happen to Bad People to respond to the idea that “bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable.”

But, he argued, while we must believe in a God who is good, we have to give up the idea that he is omnipotent. He created a world where the laws of science operate and we have free will, so terrible things happen, but it is better this way than for human beings to be automatons, he wrote. Kushner’s theodicy—a theory of why there is evil—gives comfort to those who want to believe in a loving God, even if he is somewhat dethroned from traditional conceptions.

However, we have already noted in Chapter Five, it does not really make sense to have human beings come into a world where they will be victims of natural disasters on the scale they occur. And as we also discussed in Chapter Six, our free will is at best very limited. We may not be automatons, but a great deal of suffering is not due to our lack of free will anyway.

Kushner also wrote that God should be given credit for the positive things that come out of letting the laws of nature and science operate unhindered, such as medical advances. But does it really make sense for God not to have prompted the earlier discovery of germs or anesthesia?

A third school of Jewish thought on the source of evil in the world can be found in the Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of books like the medieval Sefer Zohar. According to Wiki, a majority of the Orthodox consider these to be inspired scriptures. The Zohar ascribes evil to a supernatural force, the Sitra Ahra, emanating from the impersonal aspect of God, which is necessary to give humans freedom of choice.

Yaweh/Jehovah

While recognizing the humanistic good that the rabbinic tradition has given the world, many Jews accept that the Hebrew Bible’s earliest books present

an unflattering picture of God.

Yet traditional Judaism has affirmed his position in “The 13 Principles of Faith” written by the great medieval philosopher Rabbi Moses Maimonides, which have “become integrated into many Jewish liturgies, leading to their eventual near-universal acceptance,” according to Wiki. Among them:

- I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the Creator and Guide of everything.”
- I believe that all the words of the prophets are true.”
- I believe that the Creator knows all the deeds of human beings and all their thoughts.
- I believe that the Creator rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those that transgress them.

Of the original 613 commandments in the scriptures before the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., about half are still applicable, according to modern rabbis. But the prophets never said the original laws should be set aside; they were given as revelations from God.

There is a long list of crimes that God declared required the death penalty http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Actions_punishable_by_death_in_the_Old_Testar Among them:

- Adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22)
- Male homosexuality (Leviticus 20:13)
- Lying about being a virgin while a girl still lives with her parents (Deuteronomy 22:20-21).
- Being a victim of rape if the girl is engaged and lives in a city (Deuteronomy 22:23-27).
- Incest (Leviticus 20:17).
- Masturbation (Genesis 38: 8-10).
- Breaking the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14).
- Blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14-16, 23).

- Cursing one's parents (Exodus 21:17).
- Disobedience by children to their parents' commands (Deuteronomy 12:18-21).

There are also crimes that required exile, which would have been considered nearly as bad as death:

- Having sex with a menstruating woman (Leviticus 20:18).
- Not getting circumcised (Genesis 17:14).
- Waiting too long before eating animal sacrifices (Leviticus 19:5-8).
- Eating leavened bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:15).

In Deuteronomy 5:8-10, Yahweh declares one of the 10 Commandments, the basic law of Judaism: "You shall not make yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing loving-kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep my commandments."

Judaism does not encourage conversions and the wisdom of the rabbis guides modern Jews, so there is little effort to defend the historic claims of God's revelations to outsiders.

But Christian apologists feel the need to reconcile the harshness of the Old Testament with the message of love and forgiveness in the New Testament. One effort to justify visiting the above passage is at http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/god_iniquity_third_fourth_generat It notes: ""This is not just any old sin, but the sin of idol worship. God does not punish the innocent, including the children of sinners. But these children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are not quite so innocent. It says they represent 'those who hate Me.' They hate God and have followed their

fathers into idolatry, so there is good reason for God's punishment."

Critics also question the ethics of a God who commands genocide, which is central to the Israelites' conquest of Canaan (even their animals must be slaughtered; 1 Samuel 15:3). At http://www.gotquestions.org/Old-Testament-violence.html a defense is provided:

The Canaanites were a brutal, aggressive people who engaged in bestiality, incest, and even child sacrifice. Even so, the destruction was directed more at the Canaanite religion than the Canaanite people per se (Deuteronomy 7:3-5, 12:2-3). Individuals, like Rehab in Jericho, could still find mercy that follows repentance (Joshua 2). It must be remembered that God gave the Canaanite people more than sufficient time to repent of their evil ways—over 400 years!

But didn't God command the Israelites to kill non-combatants? He did. We must remember that even though the Canaanite women did not fight, this in no way means they were innocent, as their seductive behavior in Numbers 25 indicates.

What about the children? First, no human (including infants) is truly innocent. The Scripture teaches that we are all born in sin (Psalms 51:5, 58:3). Second, God is sovereign over all life and can take it whenever He sees fit. Third, it would have been cruel for God to take the lives of all the Canaanites except the infants and children. Without the protection of the parents, they were likely to have faced death anyway due to starvation.

These "justifications" given for God's commands only feed those who criticize the Hebrew Bible, including Rick Wernli, author of God Is Evil, who comments that "the God of the Bible may be the most evil character ever to appear in literature."

It should go without saying that criticisms of Judaism are not anti-Semitic (for the record, a large portion of my friends, colleagues, and extended family are Jewish and I have written about heroes of the Holocaust).

ISLAM

I have visited many Muslim countries (including Saudi Arabia for a week) and have talked with leaders and ordinary believers. I have a great deal of respect for how Islam can play a positive role in individual and community life.

The ritual of stopping everything to pray five times a day is hard for outsiders to understand: how can work be disrupted like that? But lifestyles have been adapted and this guarantees that no matter what else is going on, faithful Muslims cannot go more than a few hours without being reminded that Allah is watching.

Karen Armstrong's second biography on Islam's prophet, Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time, does a good job of explaining to non-Muslims the values he imparted and how some of the religion's extremists have distorted his message.

Compared with his time, Muhammad was not especially warlike and battles were waged for strategic defense against aggressive pagan enemies. At the end of his career he put a greater emphasis on the need for peace.

By far the vast majority of the 1.6 billion Muslims today embrace modern education and reject the need for a holy war against Western civilization (I spent three weeks in Turkey, which is a model for integrating Islam and modernism).

Muhammad considered Jews and Christians religious cousins as "People of the Book" (he did kill one group of Jews, but that was because they were traitors, Armstrong noted). This tolerance laid the foundation for the Golden Age of Moorish Spain, when all three faiths flourished together 712-1066 A.D. under Muslim rulers.

The growth in anti-Jewish attitudes among Muslims (Arabs are also Semites) and the extremist interpretations of the Koran can be blamed on rulers who want to misdirect the anger of the public to scapegoats, on the influence of a small number of radical preachers, and on the general

frustration over the lack of opportunity because of backwards economies.

I have an especially high regard for the Sufi tradition, which seeks a personal, mystical relationship with Allah, whose practitioners in my experience are deeply spiritual, loving, and tolerant. Despite widespread support throughout the Islamic world, religious radicals consider them heretics and in some cases kill them.

Criticisms of Islam

A case can be made that the illiterate Muhammad could not have composed the Koran, which was written in exceptionally beautiful Arabic. He said he memorized messages given to him by the Archangel Gabriel from Allah and these were said to have been written down during his lifetime.

Assuming all this is true, does this mean that the Koran is a pure divine revelation? Other religions also can put forth claims of supernatural support.

Christians cite hundreds of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Catholics point to the well-documented phenomenon of 200 of its saints whose bodies have not decomposed, as well as appearances of the Virgin Mary to tens of thousands (see Scott Rogo's Miracles).

Religion scholar Harold Bloom, in The American Religion, wrote that Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of Mormonism, was one of the few religious leaders who could enable others to see his visions. Some contemporary Mormons report visitations from dead ancestors requesting the performance of sacred temple rites. Every member of their church is promised "a personal witness" of the truth of its scripture, the Book of Mormon.

Hindus and Buddhists tell of miracles performed by their saints and point to the evidence for reincarnation.

Religions with supernatural evidence that seems to support them could be mixtures of truth and the human cultures they are embedded in.

Non-Muslim scholars are skeptical that the “hadith,” the purported sayings and actions of Muhammad, are entirely accurate, according to John Esposito, author of What Everyone Knows About Islam and director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. These sayings have been used to justify slavery, the death penalty for those who leave Islam, and an inferior social position for women.

My own view is that there are some fundamental flaws in Islam’s philosophy, as with all traditional religions.

Allah is said to be perfect, all-powerful and all-knowing, so all events are foreseen and predestined. At the same time, human beings are said to have free will.

As we argued in Chapters Five and Six, these are contradictions. More importantly, a God in total control would be responsible for all terrible diseases and disasters.

Furthermore, if Allah could foresee that the beings he would create would do great evil, why would he go ahead? The standard response is that the ultimate reason for human existence is to worship God, which makes him sound like someone with a cosmic ego that needs to be stroked constantly, even if it means massive suffering throughout history.

Allah and Yaweh are said by Muslims to be the same and the Hebrew Bible paints a picture of a God who has great flaws, from the modern perspective.

Finally, we will build on our understanding of Yahweh/Allah and turn to a religion that claims to be of the same Western monotheistic tradition, yet professes belief in the Trinity, three divine personalities in a single God, which mystifies Christians as much as non-believers.

Chapter Ten

What Are the Problems With Christianity?

Traditional Christianity shares the burdens of Judaism and Islam with respect to the concept of God the all-powerful and all-knowing in the Hebrew Bible.

It also has its own set of special problems that act as a barrier to accepting the most fundamentalist interpretation of the New Testament, which describes the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples.

It is very difficult for those of us who grew up as members of Christian churches to be objective about what the Bible says because of two millennia of dogmatic interpretations by the contending sects.

Although many of the 2.2 billion adherents are only nominal, half were baptized Catholic, about 800 million belong to Protestant denominations, and 200 million are members of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

To understand who Jesus was and his message, one has to start with the question of how reliable the New Testament is as a source of the facts (let alone the larger truths).

It is important to know that no scholars believe the “synoptic gospels” (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with supposedly similar accounts of Jesus’ life) were written by the apostles whose names they now bear. These were probably composed 70-90 A.D. and the names were attached much later to give them credibility.

The fourth life of Jesus, the Gospel of John, is from a very different perspective, and was written in stages, probably finalized close to 100.

There are thousands of discrepancies in the manuscripts we have, with the oldest copies made about 250, all written in Greek. Yet Jesus and his apostles spoke Aramaic, the first instance of a transition in which errors could be introduced (it is unlikely that the apostles were even literate, since few Jewish

peasants of the time were).

The first gospel to be written, Mark, was probably composed after 70 A.D., since it refers to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem that occurred that year. That would place it 40 years after Jesus' death and these gospels provide plenty of evidence they were not written by eyewitnesses, says the eminent New Testament scholar James Robinson in The Gospel of Jesus.

It is believed that the authors of Matthew and Luke drew on Mark and a list of Jesus' sayings known as Q (from the German Quelle or "source"), as well as other sources. Matthew has more of a Jewish Christian perspective, while Luke tells the story from the viewpoint of the "gentiles," the non-Jews to whom Paul directed his ministry.

The Life of Jesus

For anyone who grew up with the impression that the synoptics were more or less in harmony with each other, it is shocking to find out how different and contradictory they are.

Bible scholar and former evangelical Christian Bart Ehrman, in Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible and Why We Don't Know About Them, analyzes the discrepancies in a non-technical way and his comments are worth studying in detail. Just a few examples regarding the most important points in Jesus' life:

Birth and early years

Matthew and Luke tell long stories about Jesus' birth and childhood that seem to be from entirely different traditions. There are only two key points on which they agree: that Mary was a virgin and that he was born in Bethlehem.

Matthew has the three wise men from the East coming to Jesus' home in Bethlehem by following a star. King Herod hears about this and orders the slaughter of local children under two years old, implying the birth could have

happened that much earlier. Matthew says that to avoid the slaughter, Jesus' family flees to Egypt.

After Herod's death, they plan to return to Judea, where Bethlehem is, but because of fear of the new ruler, Herod's son, they decide to relocate to Nazareth in the northern area of Galilee.

Luke, however, claims there was an empire-wide census during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria, although there are no other sources indicating such a massive event took place. This would also date it 10 years after the death of King Herod, in contradiction to Matthew.

According to Luke, Joseph, living in Nazareth, had to return to Bethlehem because his ancestor, David, was born there a thousand years earlier, which is how they ended up in a stable, since the inns were full. It's impossible to imagine a census then or today that would require everyone to return to where their ancestors were a millennium before.

A month or so after his birth, Jesus' family returns to Nazareth (they do not go to Egypt).

What Matthew and Luke were trying to do with these stories was to show how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that the Jewish Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of the House of David. Each presents a different genealogy to show that Jesus is descended from David through Joseph.

But this is odd because they also testify that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus—God the Father was.

Timing of the Last Supper and Death

According to Mark, Jesus and his disciples went to Jerusalem for the Passover feast and on the day before, he instructs them to prepare it to be served that evening, which would be the start of Passover (in the Jewish calendar, each day begins in the evening). As Jesus breaks the bread, he tells them this is symbolic of the breaking of his body that will occur, while the wine is a symbol of the blood he will shed.

After they eat, they go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays. Judas brings Roman soldiers to arrest him there and Jesus spends the night in jail. In the morning, he is tried by Pontius Pilate and Jesus is crucified at 9 a.m. on the day of Passover.

In John, while the sequence is similar, there is little said about the preparation or symbolism of the meal. What he highlights is that Jesus washes the feet of the disciples.

John says that the death sentence was handed down at noon the day before Passover, a day before Mark's schedule. It seems that John wants this to take place at the time when the lambs are slaughtered for the Passover meal because John is the only one to call Jesus "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Details of the Trial and Crucifixion

In Mark, Jesus is mocked and beaten by Pilate's soldiers and is taken away to be crucified. Two robbers who are crucified with Jesus mock him.

Jesus says nothing until the very end, when he utters, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and the curtain of the temple rips in half when he dies. A soldier testifies that he has witnessed the death of the Son of God.

In Luke, Pilate turns to the Herod II (son of the king who killed the infants) to try to get him to take over Jesus' case. It is Herod's men who mock Jesus. On the way to the crucifixion, Jesus shows concern for those he meets.

One of the robbers mocks Jesus, but the other reprimands his fellow criminal and asks Jesus to remember him. Jesus responds that the two of them will be together in paradise as soon as they die.

Jesus says of those killing him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The temple curtain rips while he is still alive. At the end, Jesus says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." This is a confident and calm statement, rather than the impression Mark gives that

Jesus feels abandoned by God.

Resurrection

Christian apologists cite the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection as primary evidence that it took place. All four gospels agree that Jesus rose on the third day after his death and that Mary Magdalene found his tomb empty (however, scholars agree that the last 12 verses of Mark were added to the original much later). But the differences are striking:

- According to John, Magdalene went alone. Mathew says she went with another Mary. Mark says Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome went together. Luke mentions a number of women from Galilee and elsewhere.
- Mark says the stone had already been rolled away from the tomb when the women arrive, while Matthew says an angel did this while they were there.
- Mark says they saw a young man there, Luke says two men, Matthew an angel, and John has no one else there.
- Mark says the women were told to tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. Luke says the disciples were to be told to remember what Jesus had told them while in Galilee, that he would die and rise again, and they remain in Jerusalem.
- Matthew says the women told 11 of the disciples what happened, Luke says they told the 11 and other people, John claims they told Peter and one unnamed discipline, while Mark states that they told no one.
- What do the disciples do in response? According to Matthew, Jesus immediately appears to them. Luke reports that the disciples do not believe "an idle tale." John says they go to the tomb to investigate.
- According to Luke, while the disciples remain in Jerusalem, the same day that the women saw the resurrected Jesus, he appears to two disciples,

who tell the others and then Jesus appears to all of them and ascends to heaven. In Acts, they are told to remain in Jerusalem for 50 days until the Day of Pentecost, while Mark says they went to Galilee to meet the resurrected Jesus immediately after hearing about the resurrection.

If this were a trial, the case would be dismissed for lack of credible witnesses from Jesus' inner circle, let alone the 500 who were said to have met him after the resurrection.

But this is not to say that the disciples simply made up their stories. For a variety of reasons, the tomb could have been empty. The concept of resurrection was already a belief in some Jewish circles and it may have been assumed he had risen. The apostles also may have been visited by the spirit of the deceased Jesus. Witnesses in cases of human and animal ghosts have reported that the some spirits can even be felt. But we have no first-hand accounts.

Raising questions about the accuracy of the New Testament mean that Jesus was a mere mortal. He could have been a prophet with supernatural powers or a savior-redeemer sent by God the Father.

The Christian God

The deeper one goes into what the New Testament says about the relationship between Jesus and the Father, the more the orthodox theology of the Trinity can be seen as a development hundreds of years after Jesus' death.

According to Robinson, if one extracts the oldest "Q sayings" from the synoptic gospels, Jesus repeatedly distinguishes himself from God:

- The Lord's Prayer is addressed to the Heavenly Father.
- Jesus says he casts out demons in the name of the Father.
- He tells a crowd to trust that God will provide for them, just as he does for the birds.
- All three synoptics tell the story of the young man who addresses Jesus as "Good Master," to which Jesus responds, "Why do you call me good?

There is none good but one, that is God."

Jesus never refers to himself as the Christ (Greek for the Hebrew "messiah," meaning "the anointed one").

He does call himself "son of man," but this is better translated as "son of humanity," a rabbinic term for a member of the human race.

During his baptism, a voice from heavens declares him to be "my son, the beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." One would think this makes the distinction clear, but later misunderstandings of the title "son of God" obscure this. This was a term used for Roman rulers, who were semi-divine representatives.

Jesus uses this phrase in the famous admonition to "love your enemies and pray for those who are persecuting you," which he promises will enable people "to become sons of your Father, for he raises his sun on the bad and the good and rains on the just and unjust."

Ehrman points out that while none of the synoptics claim Jesus is the same as God the Father, they do give him special divine status. The earliest Christians appear to have believed that this came at his resurrection, as in speeches by the apostles in Acts, though these do not claim Jesus is God.

Even the seven genuine epistles of Paul (scholars agree that six of the traditionally ascribed were not authored by him), written 52-64 A.D., which confirm Jesus' divine status, make it clear this is because he is an agent of the Father, like the angels. For example, in Philippians 2:5-11, God the Father is said to have "exalted" Jesus so that "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

By 70, when Mark was being written, Jesus is depicted as having been made the Messiah at the time of the baptism.

Luke later pushes this status back to Jesus' birth, since God is said to be his biological father.

Only the last of the gospels, John, written near the end of the first century,

claims he was actually the “Son of God” before the universe was created. If this is the true doctrine, why is it not mentioned in the three synoptics? None of the “I am” quotations by Jesus found in John are in any of the earlier gospels (nor is almost any of John’s material).

Yet even the author of John makes a differentiation between God the Father and the Son: he refers to the Father as “ho theos” (the God) and to the Son only as “theos” (God).

The unity between the two is actually explained in John 17:20-21, during Jesus’ prayer to the Father about the disciples: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word; that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they all be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

In other words, Jesus is united in love and spiritual intent with God, but not as the same being. But some early Christian leaders insisted that the Father and the Son not only were two aspects of one God, there was a third member of the “Godhead,” the Holy Spirit. Out of this debate emerged the doctrine of the Trinity.

Others came up with different interpretations of the passages about Jesus and God. One group accepted the idea of Patripassianism, which meant that God the Father became God the Son when he incarnated; they were one and the same God in different roles. This became accepted by the leadership of the church in Rome by the end of the 2nd century.

Another popular school of thought throughout early Christianity was Arianism which stated that Jesus was, indeed, the divine Son of the Father before the creation of the universe, but he was subordinate to the Father. It was the Son, Jesus, who was incarnated.

A deacon in Alexandria, Athanasius, disagreed sharply. He argued that there were three separate persons in the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an equal part of the one God, all “of the same substance.”

Finally, the nominally Christian Emperor Constantine called the Nicene

Council in 325 to debate this. A majority voted for Athanasius' interpretation, but the arguments continued for decades (in fact, Athanasius eventually served as bishop for 46 years, but was so controversial that he was sent into exile five times for a total of 17 years).

If the doctrine of the Trinity were a vital truth, why was it not made clear in the New Testament? A much later copyist tried to make it appear so by inserting a reference to the Trinity in 1 John 5:7-8.

The Book of Revelation

If there is one book that seems to be out of harmony with the rest of the New Testament (with its emphasis on love, forgiving our enemies, helping the poor, and Jesus' sacrifice for mankind) it is the Apocalypse of John aka the Book of Revelation. It is a fitting end for the Bible, since it is about the terrors unleashed by God at the "end of times" and the consignment of sinners to eternal hellfire.

The tone fits well with the image of Yaweh/Jehovah and Revelation has more allusions to the Old Testament than any other book in the New (concentrating on Isaiah, Psalms, and Ezekiel, while referencing few of the books at the beginning of the Bible, which were the primary sources for the rest of the Christian authors).

As Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels says, in Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation, "The Book of Revelation is the strangest book in the Bible—and the most controversial."

The traditional ascription of Revelation to the Apostle John has long been seen—by early church fathers and modern scholars—as incorrect. For starters, the Greek style is very different for Revelation, the Gospel of John and the letters of John. None of these were likely written by the apostle.

In fact, there was a great deal of resistance to Athanasius' insistence that Revelation be included in the Bible when he issued his list of canonical books in 367. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem, a council of bishops in Asia Minor, the

eminent theologian Gregory of Nazianzus, and the church historian Eusebius raised questions about its legitimacy.

Even Martin Luther condemned it—until he found it useful to compare the pope with the seven-headed beast of Revelation (the pope returned the favor). If church leaders found Revelation questionable, why should the ordinary Christian look to it for dogma and how should anyone know how to interpret its obscure symbolism?

Yet it is now part of the accepted scripture of traditional Christianity (to read the complicated plot, see the entry in Wiki).

I have a special interest in this, having been to the cave on the island of Patmos off of Turkey, where it was composed, as well as to some of the cities on the mainland which the author references.

Two satanic beasts are mentioned. One is seven-headed, which seems to refer to the seven Julio-Claudian emperors of Rome. The other beast has the mysterious number 666 associated with his name, which most scholars agree is a coded reference to Nero (probably to avoid the author being charged with treason).

Part of Revelation is devoted to denunciation of gentile Christians, converted by the ministry of Paul and his disciples. The author believes in Jesus as a Jewish Messiah and abhors those who belong to “a synagogue of Satan,” where gentiles claim to a Spiritual Israel.

Most of the book is dedicated to enthusiastically detailing the horrors God will unleash on the world. Satan and his minions fight back until Jesus rides in on a white horse to command the angels who defeat them. He then reigns over the faithful for one thousand years on a newly-restored earth.

After the millennium passes, Satan again attacks the people of God, but is defeated. Everyone who ever lived is resurrected and judged, with the righteous to live with Jesus on the immortalized earth forever (not in a spiritual afterlife).

The wicked are cast into “the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is

the second death" (21:8). These include "cowards, the faithless, the polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars…"

So it appears that anyone who ever told a lie, was afraid to act boldly, worshipped a different God, or had sex out of marriage will undergo "everlasting punishment" (according to Matthew 25:46). Torturers who do not kill their victims seem to have a loophole.

The reader could be forgiven for wondering about a comparison of this list of evil-doers with the synoptic gospels, where Jesus put people who oppress the less fortunate or religious hypocrites at the top of his list of bad guys.

The Bible says that few are destined to live with Jesus, for "wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction…but small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life and only a few will find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

According to Revelation 17:8, the names of the "elect" were "written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." In other words, God created each human, so he knows how each will act in advance. If most are destined for the eternal fires of hell, what was the point of their being sent to earth to begin with and why is God not responsible for this outcome?

There are many more issues that could be addressed, from the so-called Original Sin of Adam and Eve, which is said to contaminate everyone who follows, to whether faith in Jesus automatically leads to "good works" and salvation. Two millennia of Christian tradition and what the Bible actually says often seem to be at odds.

In the next section, we will draw some conclusions about what kind of spiritual path would take into account all we have learned thus far.

Part IV

Piecing Together the Cosmic Puzzle

Chapter Eleven

Drawing Some Conclusions

Let us review some of the key points we have covered, to see what conclusions can reasonably be drawn about religion and the big questions of our existence.

In the first section, we reconsidered specific examples of the hardline skeptics' case that there is nothing supernatural.

Their attitude is the same sort of position that physicists had at the end of the 19th century, when they imagined all the important questions had been answered.

Atheism and a hardline belief in "materialism" (that there is nothing but a material world, no supernatural) do not have to be positions held by the same people, but almost always are. We selected three examples of supposedly paranormal phenomena that materialists insist do not exist.

Many people might not equate something like extra-sensory perception with the supernatural. But as materialists have argued, the scientific establishment's position is that cases of supposed ESP are really no more than tricks that professional magicians use, so in Chapter One we examined this assertion.

It is true that many so-called psychics are likely just frauds trying to scam their victims. But it could be that some people do have mind-reading ability.

The real issue is, have double-blind experiments been done that show that measurable telepathy can actually take place under the right circumstances? The answer is clearly yes, which calls into question the objectivity of militant skeptics.

However, that is not the same as saying that even the most talented "psychics" are right most of the time. Both the skeptics and the believers find it hard to accept that the answer is not black or white, that ESP is usually a

weak phenomenon.

In Chapter Two, we tackled a much more controversial issue: unidentified flying objects or UFOs. While even some atheists might accept the reality of ESP, almost all would consider belief in UFOs to be the most outlandish example of a gullible public, the result of simple misidentification of natural phenomena. While many atheists believe that aliens might visit our earth at some point, they absolutely reject the notion that this has been happening since Kenneth Arnold's claim of encountering a "flying saucer" in 1947.

In a review of three cases, we avoided presenting too much technical detail that would bore readers. These are just representative examples of many that have been examined that have one thing in common: the arguments of skeptics require that they distort the facts about the evidence.

In the Mansfield case, we had a four-man helicopter crew who were trained observers of aerial phenomena and whose testimonies were in agreement.

In the New Zealand example, the crew of a plane reported seeing objects that were picked up on multiple types of radar and by witnesses on the ground.

In the Hudson Valley, thousands of people have reported close encounters with aerial vehicles which performed in ways that are impossible for our level of technology.

Skeptics who have specialized in refuting such evidence are unable to mount arguments that are scientifically or logically sound. They succeed because most other skeptics are unfamiliar with the case facts: they have faith in their designated hitters.

There have been a number of prominent scientists who, after examining a wide array of evidence carefully, came to believe that UFOs cannot be accounted for with mundane explanations. However, the difficulty of tracking these phenomena and the lack of credibility of some of the more enthusiastic proponents have made it difficult to get the media to pay serious attention.

In Chapter Three, we examined the ultimate example of the supernatural: is

there life after death?

Atheists and materialists are confident this is one debate believers cannot win. They have pushed their arguments in the media very hard: evidence of ghosts is anecdotal from people wishing their dead family members returned; near-death experiences are just hallucinations of the dying brain; and so-called mediums just do research in advance and make educated guesses about what their victims want to hear about their deceased loved ones.

While skeptics have no excuse for dispassionately looking at the evidence for ESP and UFOs, the field of afterlife is certainly one where sensible people could be forgiven for being cynical. Yet there is evidence that NDEs cannot be hallucinations and a common sense approach to reports of ghosts shows some cases cannot be easily dismissed as nonsense.

The Good God

In the second section, we turned to three broad issues at the foundation of traditional religion.

In Chapter Four, we discussed the pros and cons of whether evidence of order in nature means there is a higher intelligence behind it. This has been a traditional argument for belief in God.

However, atheists counter that biological evolution shows a tremendous amount of death and waste not consistent with a guiding intelligence. Nor does the slow progress over hundreds of millions of years seem to support this.

Some physicists respond that the deeper they look, the more astonishing the fundamental order of the universe appears to be. Leading philosophers have added that in the face of so much unknown about nature and the possibility of other dimensions, the proper response ought to be humility and curiosity to know more.

Atheists could be right, but they discredit their overall theory by reacting

irrationally to counter-arguments. Thus, while eager to assert that religion can lead to violence, they refuse to admit that atheistic Marxism had the same result.

In Chapter Five, we noted that it is extremely difficult for people to even be aware of the massive amount of suffering that life on earth involves. Human beings are easily overwhelmed by bad news and we have to shut down empathy to be able to function. No one could be happy on a day-to-day basis and do their job if they were in preoccupied by the innumerable tragedies around the world.

Nor do most Americans have much knowledge of global history and prehistory to appreciate just how much things have improved in the past century in terms of suffering from disease.

All of this raises the question about how God could say, according to the Bible, that the creation of the earth was a good thing. One answer is that the Old Testament provides evidence that the Creator is hardly the benevolent God of popular belief.

Believers have coped with the contradiction in two ways. One is to have faith that at some point, sense will be made of the way things are. Maybe a “final judgment” will deliver the justice that has been lacking.

Another approach is to recognize that even in the worst of circumstances, valuable lessons can be learned (although this is making lemonade out of lemons, rather than asking why suffering is really necessary).

Neither of these theories addresses the fact that even in modern times when diseases have become under some control, life is full of accidents that wreak havoc with the idea that everything is part of God’s master plan.

In Chapter Six, we reconsidered the assumption that God has provided free will. If he is all-knowing, that absolute foreknowledge would mean that the outcome cannot be changed: the lack of free will might be caused by genetics or our social and physical environment, but the ability to be omniscient about someone’s fate means the end is predetermined.

One then has to ask why God would create humans whose end is known to be evil. Does God have no responsibility for moving ahead with creation in that case? The Bible's account of the Flood reports that "God repented" of having made humanity and destroyed all but a handful on Noah's ark. This does not sound like the all-powerful God Western monotheism has preached.

We also reviewed the evidence that people may have some level of free will, of making choices that could be unpredictable even by God. It appears to very limited, so why hold man fully accountable for his actions?

Are the Answers Found in Religion?

Having already shown that the notion of the personal Good God ignores important arguments, yet skeptics offer no credible theory about the nature of reality, can traditional religion still answer the big questions of life?

In Chapter Seven, we took a close look at the fashionable philosophy of Buddhism. The chaos of contradictory paths in Buddhism—some believe in many gods, some in no god—raises the question of what the Buddha actually taught. Without that foundation, it is hard to accept anything claimed to be revealed truth.

There are also questionable doctrines that most schools at least give lip service to, although they have a hard time defending them with any logic: that there is no self that survives as a spirit with memory into an afterlife; that nirvana ends the need for the "no self" to reincarnate; that there is any reality beyond the one ultimate Ground of Being.

Furthermore, all Buddhist paths have one thing in common: they have to admit that by their own standards not very many people have achieved spiritual liberation, which raises the question of how effective the philosophy is.

In Chapter Eight, we turned to Hinduism. Far more varied than any other group of related religions, we concentrated on two aspects.

One was the extreme claims of the most radical version of Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy most popular with Western intellectuals: that there is no reality to anything we think we experience because we are all illusionary projections of the impersonal Brahman, the single cosmic reality. It is astounding how many intelligent people have embraced this against all logic.

In India itself, this has been rejected in favor of belief in personal gods who are in some kind of relationship to Brahman, with humans and animals as intentional, independent creations. The goal is to achieve a spiritual state by doing good deeds and rituals that return one to the divine presence.

The weakness of mainstream Hinduism is belief in reincarnation, which assumes that eventually one can overcome negative karma—the consequence of bad deeds—and transcend rebirth. It sounds logical at first: you are experiencing difficulties in this life because of what you did in a prior life. But reincarnation and karma raise most problems than they solve. The evidence for it is weak, despite the claims of enthusiasts.

In Chapter Nine, we looked at Judaism and Islam, which share a belief in the God of Abraham and Moses.

While both paths have provided followers with important guides to ethical living, neither has a good explanation for why an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God created a world with so much suffering.

Finally, in Chapter Ten, we examined the world's largest community of faith, Christianity. This is probably the most challenging for readers to consider, since most of us come from that tradition.

The first problem is that a fundamentalist faith in the accuracy of the New Testament is not based on the facts. The so-called synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—contradict each other on many important points, such as what happened after the resurrection of Jesus.

The Gospel of John, the fourth account of Jesus' life, has almost nothing in common with the others. All of these were written by people who were not eyewitnesses to the events they describe.

And all scholars agree that half of the letters attributed to Paul were not written by him. So how can one express complete faith in the Bible, which was only put together a few centuries after Jesus' death?

The traditional Christian idea of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit being one God—is a late interpretation and contradicts a number of important scriptures in which Jesus makes it plain that he is not God, only united with the Father in the same way anyone should relate to God, "in spirit."

The Book of Revelation was clearly not written by the author of the Gospel of John, despite the traditional attribution. Its spirit is closer to that of the vengeful God of the Old Testament.

All of this does not mean that belief in Jesus as a savior is not a valid path, but it does mean that traditional Christian theology needs to be reconsidered.

Synthesizing the Answers

If we accept most of the above, there are a number of tentative conclusions one could reasonably draw:

- Materialists need to drag themselves into the 21st century. The fact that people overall have very limited encounters with the supernatural does not negate its existence. Materialists should regard other paranormal dimensions the same way they do the "multiverse" theorized by quantum physicists.
- People and at least some higher animals have spirits that transcend death. There are also spirits that may not have incarnated at all. Shamans have said some spirits are friendly to humans, others are hostile, and some are neutral, what we might call angels, demons, and lost souls.
- What exactly happens after survival to the other side is a deep mystery, even to the spirits there. The ability to communicate between dimensions is very limited, including between dimensions on the other side. This

could be a matter of physics or an artificial barrier to knowledge imposed by spirits who exercise some form of control. The result for earthly religion is a spiritual version of the story of the blind men who described an elephant by the particular part they could feel.

- Reincarnation would only make it less likely that individuals will have a chance to advance spiritually or materially. Each birth, generally into the Third World for untold millennia, would bring with it a new set of handicaps of all kinds. It may be that some spirits are drawn back into bodies, but it would due to an attraction or force having nothing to do with karma, which has too many logical barriers to work as advocates claim.
- Some spirits (whether disembodied humans or entities that have never been born) promote specific religions, appearing to individuals and groups as the Virgin Mary, the Angel Gabriel, or Lord Krishna. These encounters have value in reinforcing the faith of believers, but should not be mistaken for validating a universal dogma.
- There is no traditional hell, though perhaps some people who die suffer mentally for a time because of their bad deeds. But no God worth the title would inflict eternal punishment, especially if he created them and is responsible for their makeup.
- Because of the immense suffering that earth life involves, with no proportionality of pain to benefit, putting spirits into bodies could not have been the idea of a good, personal God. It seems more likely to be either the doing of an impersonal being, a process driven by individual spirits' attachment to the material world, or due to a cosmic accident that is ongoing.
- No extraterrestrials have made official contact with governments, probably because they have good reasons to avoid becoming involved in a violent, dysfunctional civilization. On the other hand, perhaps many of the so-called aliens are not from other planets because the conditions for

intelligent life may not exist elsewhere, as David Waltham argues in Lucky Planet: Why Earth is Exceptional and What That Means for Life in the Universe. It could be this is an anomaly, perhaps an accident.

- Astrophysicist and folklore researcher Jacques Vallee has shown parallels between reports of “alien abductions” and stories of encounters with fairies in ancient times. This suggests that many of these experiences are part of the same complex of events staged by spirits who want to promote religion. The ability of UFOs to appear or disappear instantly could be technological or supernatural.
- Yet enough mystics from all traditions, even ordinary believers, have claimed to have direct contact with a divine presence that God has to be taken seriously, even if the concept should take an untraditional form to account for the points we have raised.

If you disagree with some of these conclusions, I would recommend returning to the chapter that dealt with the issues in question to restudy, perhaps to consult some of the books recommended. If you feel a question still needs to be answered, contact the author at www.GodReconsidered.com.

Once you are satisfied that the foundational ideas make sense, go on to Chapter 12.

Chapter Twelve

An Alternative Religious History

Having placed many of the pieces of a cosmic jigsaw puzzle on the table, let us consider a philosophy that could account for most of them. I can speak from my own long search for answers and it would be a disservice to readers to play it safe and not to share where my path led.

As Francis Collins, the genetics pioneer who wrote The Language of God, said: “Nobody gets argued all the way into becoming a believer on the sheer basis of logic and reason. That requires a leap of faith.”

I had spent my first four decades not only accepting a literal interpretation of the Bible, but working out arguments to counter critics. But as my journalistic investigation of the paranormal deepened, I realized that traditional explanations for the purpose of life did not add up.

Then in January 1989, I had an unexpected mystical experience that lasted several hours. The understanding gradually unfolded that earthly life could not provide very good conditions for spiritual advancement for most people back to the dawn of man. Of those who survived into adulthood, few had much time to devote to developing themselves.

I knew from extensive research that spirits had been giving revelations, visions, and spiritual experiences to their chosen prophets and gurus, who contradicted each other. This suggested that there was no overarching power, no traditional personal God, guiding human enlightenment.

Yet I knew that atheistic materialism was intellectually dishonest; there is plenty of evidence for some seemingly supernatural phenomena.

However one wants to define God, he, she, or it cannot be ignored: there were too many people, in too many traditions, who have directly sensed a divine power at the root of reality. I, too, have had experiences that seemed to confirm that. But what kind of God would allow the vast amount of pointless

suffering?

And how was I to account for Jesus? He seemed to be at the very least divinely inspired, perhaps more than that. There had to be a reason he had so much impact on those who knew him.

I did not know then what philosophy would match this vision. I talked with religious philosophers, read widely, and participated in everything from Jain temple ceremonies to Nichiren Buddhist chanting.

The Early Church

In 2005, I took my leap of faith after I found the one path that had what I felt were the best answers: Gnostic Christianity.

Everything I learned aligned with its inspired insights. There were further personal experiences as part of my conversation, but it is more important for the reader to know something about the hidden history of Gnosticism.

I should also state for the record that, since Gnosticism does not have hard dogmas, the opinions here and throughout the book are mine and not necessarily shared by others on this broad path.

Gnostic Christianity was one of the most popular forms of the religion before Catholicism became favored by the Roman Emperor Constantine starting in 317. That is when he ordered confiscation of the property of bishops who held the Donatist position that church sacraments were not valid if they were administered by those who had compromised with pagan Rome.

In 325, Constantine endorsed the majority position on doctrinal matters at the Council of Nicaea, the first formal recognition of the type of Christianity that would become the Catholic church. But the emperor was not a committed Christian at the time, adhering to an eclectic faith that embraced elements of Christianity and paganism until late in his life. However, he saw political value in aligning himself with the emerging power of the Christian movement and whatever orthodoxy emerged from its internal struggles.

The scholar Elaine Pagels, who wrote the first popular discussion of the Nag Hammadi texts, The Gnostic Gospels, in 1979, followed up with Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas in 2003. She wrote that at the time of the Council of Nicaea, probably half of Christians held beliefs that were considered heretical by the Rome-sponsored church.

Yet in the first centuries after Christ, the Gnostic version of Christianity not only flourished, but might have triumphed and become the accepted version of this global faith.

One effect would have been that women would have been more prominent in the church, since they were held in higher regard by this tradition, according to Tobias Churton in Gnostic Philosophy (this was partly due to the Gnostic God being considered androgynous, the influence of the heavenly savior figure of Sophia, and the disciple Mary Magdalene being considered close to Jesus).

The core of the Gospel of Thomas, discovered with other Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi, Egpyt, in 1945, may have been written as early as 50, while the canonical gospels were probably set down 70-100. Its sayings of Jesus provide a foundation for an esoteric understanding of his life and teachings.

“The Gnostic view of Jesus was that he was a manifestation of the Godhead, the liberator and enlightener who burst open the prison of humanity’s confinement in material and mental unconsciousness,” wrote Bishop Stephan Hoeller of the modern Ecclesia Gnostica www.gnosis.org, in Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing. “Jesus exercised his mission in two ways. The first was a ministry of teaching, the second a sacramental ministry of initiatory and liberating mysteries.”

This makes more sense than the traditional Christian idea that Jesus suffered on the cross to atone for our sins. It claims that we are tainted by so-called Original Sin: God knew even the first pair of humans would be terribly flawed and thought he should go ahead with the plan anyway. Somehow, we need to be “saved” from God’s decision to make mortals.

Second, mainstream Christianity asserts that we are all so sinful there is nothing we can do to receive God's forgiveness. The only way he can forgive is if he sends his "only Son" (which is really part of God) to die on the cross and "atone" for us. If you look under "Atonement in Christianity" in Wiki, you learn that explanations for why this needed to happen began to be developed by the proto-Catholic Fathers in the 2nd century. Some of the leading candidates:

- Jesus died as part of his being a "moral influence" for us, the view now popular with liberal Christians.
- The "ransom" theory, which says that Satan had claim to the sinful and so Jesus' perfect life had to be swapped for imperfect humans.
- The "Christ victor" solution, which is that Jesus achieved our potential forgiveness (if we accept him as savior) by defeating Satan.
- The "satisfaction" explanation: God was so dishonored by our sins (even though most humans were not yet born) that only the sacrifice of his Son could satisfy the punishment required.
- With the "penal substitution" (also known as "vicarious atonement"), God's moral law was broken started with Adam and Eve, so Jesus accepted God's punishment in the sinners' place. This was developed in the 11th century and is popular with Protestants now.

Of this last theory, Richard Smoley, in Inner Christianity, wrote: "The human race so irked the Supreme Being by trespassing a minor command that it was completely alienated from him, and that God's wrath could be quenched only by having a part of himself come down and offer itself as a sacrifice to another part?"

The idea that creatures God created are so awful that the only way he cannot send them to hell to suffer for eternity is to have Jesus tormented and killed is obviously perverse (even if one thinks his real suffering was in feeling the guilt of all sins that would ever be committed, which suggests that the future is locked in place, regardless of "free will").

The Gnostic alternative view rests on understanding of “gnosis,” a Greek term that means intuitive knowledge or direct insight. Gnostics believe that they have been enlightened by the Transcendent God about the nature of the reality we live in and the possibility of life in the supernatural realm.

Hoeller explains how this applies to the Gnostic view of the resurrection:

Some sort of reanimation of Jesus’ body may have taken place on Easter morning and in most Gnostic scriptures the post-resurrection Jesus is referred to as the “living one.” But there was doubt whether he ever occupied a body like ours. Physical bodies do not walk on water, pass through walls and shine like the sun. Many Gnostics felt that Jesus’ body itself might be an “appearance” and its precise nature is a mystery, both before and after the resurrection.

More important is the Gnostic teaching that the resurrection has a deeply spiritual meaning for everyone who aspires to gnosis. For are we not all, in a certain sense, dead and entombed in material darkness, wrapped in a winding sheet of unconsciousness? The Gnostics regarded the term resurrection as a word-symbol for gnosis, or true spiritual awakening.

Esoteric Christianity

Let us next provide an overview of some of the most important leaders of early Christianity who had a Gnostic understanding of Jesus, the identity of the Old Testament God, and why humans were created.

“As soon as one turns one’s attention to the masters, the teachers and sages of Gnosticism, one encounters men of great culture and erudition, men who scrutinized the universe, the world, and their contemporaries with exceptional lucidity and penetration,” wrote Jacques Lacarriere in The Gnostics. “In the entire history of Western thought, I know of no attempt that aimed so high and was so charged with lightning flashes of insight and seeds of intuition, no endeavor that was so fruitful in producing positive revelations.”

In Samaria, what was once the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Simon Magus,

denounced as a magician in the Catholic New Testament, is said to have conveyed early Gnostic teachings. His disciple, Menander, stressed that salvation came by “gnosis” or direct awareness, rather than the faith in Jesus demanded by the emerging orthodoxy. Menander’s student, Saturninus, detailed a Gnostic mythology of how the world was created.

Another center of Gnostic Christianity was the city of Alexandria, Egypt, where the greatest of ancient libraries was. The city’s mixture of Platonic philosophers, Jewish leaders, and Christian thinkers, as well as numerous Middle Eastern religious movements, made for spiritually and intellectually stimulating discussions.

Among the prominent local teachers about a century after Jesus’ death was Carpocrates, one of the few in the Gnostic tradition to teach reincarnation explicitly, though he said that liberation could be attained in one life.

Gilles Quispel, the great 20th century scholar of the Nag Hammadi texts, once opined that while reincarnation might happen (perhaps due to a desire for physical experience), the notion of karma made no sense, since serial embodiment would not enable progress towards enlightenment.

Another Alexandrian teacher was Basilides, probably teaching 117-130. He claimed his initiation was by Glaucias, a disciple of the apostle Peter, and some of his teachings came from Matthias, who replaced Judas Iscariot.

He believed that the true God is “beyond being, without thinking, or feeling, or determining, or choosing, or being compelled, or desiring.” But then the “Great Ruler, or Demiurge, the head of the sensible universe,” thought of himself as the master of the material world, unaware of high dimensions, and “betook himself to the creation of the creatures of the universe.” So, he said, the true God and the Creator depicted in the Old Testament are not the same.

One curious footnote to Basilides is that the great Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, had a vision, which stimulated him to write a treatise in that teacher’s name, called The Seven Sermons to the Dead. This lead to his break with

Freud and Hoeller has shown how Jung's psychology reflects the Gnostic worldview.

The Church in Rome

Valentinus, who lived from about 100 to between 160 and 175 (sources differ), was educated in Alexandria before moving to Rome around 135, where he became a bishop. He taught an allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Valentinus probably wrote the beautiful poetic sermon The Gospel of Truth that instructs readers to cast off spiritual ignorance. One of his followers wrote the metaphor-filled Gospel of Philip, which includes references to Valentinian sacramental rituals. Both of these were discovered at Nag Hammadi.

Valentinus came closest to having the Gnostic interpretation become the one that the emerging church would officially embrace when his influence became so significant that he was nearly elected the bishop of Rome, the early equivalent to the Catholic pope.

Marcion was another bishop in Rome, but was excommunicated for his heretical teachings in 144, according to Andrew Phillip Smith in The Gnostics: History, Tradition, Scriptures, Influence: "Marcion's form of Christianity became a major competitor to Catholic Christianity, declaring the God of the Old Testament to be 'the author of evils.' He rejected the gospels of Matthew, Mark, John, and used only a cut-down version of the Gospel of Luke and 10 of the Pauline epistles, the first attempt to establish the Christian canon. Thus, he was indirectly responsible for the compilation of the New Testament, as Catholic leaders defined it in reaction to Marcion."

Even St. Jerome had a high regard for Marcion's knowledge of the scriptures, calling him "a veritable sage."

Because he did not preach the need to seek a special type of intuitive knowledge, some have insisted Marcion was not a full-fledged Gnostic, but

he no doubt felt that his understanding that the Creator was a false God was inspired.

By the end of the second century, Marcion's church had a strong following all over the Mediterranean region, with the early 3rd century Catholic Father Tertullian expressing alarm that "they fill the whole universe." Marcionite churches were functioning as late as the eighth century.

The first Christian state was a Gnostic one, the kingdom of Osroene headquartered at Edessa, now in Turkey near the Syrian border. The teacher Bardesanes converted King Abgar IX, who ruled 177-212 before a takeover by the Roman empire. Bardesanes is even recognized by early Catholic fathers as the originator of Christian hymns, composing some 150 poems set to music for congregations to sing. Among the most lyrically beautiful is the "Hymn of the Pearl" found in the Acts of Thomas, a Gnostic scripture.

But the first fully Christian Roman Emperor, Theodosius I, reigned from 379 to 395, and declared Catholicism the official faith. All heretics were persecuted and their property confiscated.

The first person executed by the church for heresy was the Spanish bishop Priscillian of Avila in 385 (some believe that the remains buried at the pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela are his, not those of the apostle James, which is the Catholic church's claim).

Because it was less dogmatic and organized, the Gnostic movement faded away from public view during the persecutions. Some joined related paths, notably Manichaeanism, founded by the Persian prophet Mani, who said he received his calling from an angel at age 24 in 240. An eclectic faith, it honored Jesus, Buddha, and the Zoroastrian prophet Zarathustra as messengers of God.

Mani taught that from the beginning there have been two more or less equal powers warring against each other for supremacy.

"The Father of Light has a number of 'limbs' or emanations: Reason, Mind, Intelligence, Thought, and Understanding," wrote Smoley of its beliefs in

Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy. “In addition, there are countless divine beings surrounding him. Mani also taught that there is a Father of Darkness, a mirror image with his corresponding attributes. He is named Satan or Ahriman.”

Human beings could play a positive role in this conflict by their actions, according to Mani (among other things, the strictest followers adhered to a vegetarian diet).

Mani converted the king of Babylon and traveled to India to spread the faith. In 274, after he had returned to Babylon, a new king executed Mani at the behest of Zoroastrian priests, who were jealous of his faith’s popularity.

That, however, did not bring an end to Manichaeanism. It spread into the Eastern Roman Empire of Syria, Palestine, and North Africa (where Augustine, the later Catholic Father, was initially a follower). It then grew into a world religion, finding converts throughout Central Asia, even becoming the official religion of the Uigar empire in Mongolia in 762, until its collapse in 840. The last report of Manichaeans was in 17th century China.

The Cathar Church

Gnosticism remained underground for centuries, but the Christian version made a strong comeback in the Languedoc and Provence regions of what is now southern France by the early 11th century.

It took its form as the Cathar Church, which was influenced by a form of Gnostic Christianity known as Bogomilism, founded in the 10th century in the Bulgarian Empire. There, in Bosnia, local rulers had been converted beginning in 1199 and resisted the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It survived until the Ottoman Empire conquered the area.

Bogomilism in turn had its roots in Paulicianism, which originated in the 7th century in Armenia, where it had its own state through much of the 9th century until it was defeated and believers dispersed.

Cathar Christianity flourished in the 12th century. Southeast France is now an area best-remembered for the troubadours who sang of courtly love, the powerful County of Toulouse, and the citadel of Carcassonne, whose massive walls are still a tourist attraction. Inhabitants spoke the Occitan language until the region was violently annexed by the French king in the 13th century.

The Cathars, who preached a religion that depicted Satan as the creator of the world, counseled against eating meat and believed in reincarnation. They were renowned as gentle and ethical, called “the good men and women” even by those of other faiths, in stark contrast to the corruption of local Catholic priests.

Alarmed by the decline of Catholicism there, Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order of monks, tried to convert Cathars on a mission in 1145 and also debated their leaders, but failed to have any impact.

By 1209, Pope Innocent III was desperate and the Albigensian Crusade (named after the town of Albi, where the heretics were especially strong) was declared, the only Vatican-sponsored holy war ever waged against fellow Christians.

It was easy to recruit 10,000 knights from France, where princes coveted the prosperous southern lands, with the extra benefit of the pope’s promise to reward them with forgiveness of their sins.

In the first attack, against Beziers on July 22, 1209, in a single day the French leader claimed 20,000 were slaughtered. Other Cathar strongholds resisted, many surrendered when threatened, and everything seemed under control of the princes by 1215.

But in 1215, popular revolts began and by 1226 the locals had recaptured their territory.

In 1226, the French king Louis VIII, with the support of Pope Honorius III, launched the second phase of the crusade.

The last major Cathar citadel, Montsegur, required a 10-month siege, with 300 soldiers and 200 Cathar perfecti (priests) holding off an army of 10,000.

When it surrendered in 1244, the 200 perfecti were burned at the stake. Moping up operations lasted until 1255.

Dominican monks were assigned by the pope to set up the first Inquisitions to root out the heresy in Toulouse in 1229, then in the northern Italian state of Lombardy in 1231, and finally throughout the Languedoc in 1234. Having proved its usefulness, the Inquisition was revived in Spain from 1478 to 1834.

Probably about one million people died during nearly five decades of war, according to “Massacre of the Pure” in Time magazine, April 28, 1961.

The Cathar faith went underground in France and Italy, with its last leaders burned to death in 1321, although it hung on in outposts for another century.

Gnosticism would resurrect in other forms later.

Chapter Thirteen

A Path of Inspired Insight

Although Gnostics have always been a diverse and non-dogmatic lot, Bishop Hoeller provides a list of points on which most would agree:

- There was an original realm of spiritual unity, the Pleroma or Fullness, the place of the Transcendent God. He (the male pronoun is used here out of tradition) caused the creation of aeons, “emanated powers” to assist him (these can be understood as entities more powerful than angels or as extensions of the Absolute’s attributions).
- The material universe was created by a being known as the Demiurge, due to a cosmic accident involving Sophia or Wisdom, the aeon furthest removed from the Absolute. The Demiurge denies the existence of a higher reality and, assisted by lesser beings he created, archons, placed us on earth with our divine spark (or spirit) trapped in the body and the mind (called the soul). Modern Gnostics feel free to take these events as literal or symbolic.
- We usually lack conscious awareness of this divine spark, but may be awakened to gnosis by Messengers of Light representing the Transcendent God and through our own efforts. This insight liberates the spirit to eventually reenter and remain in the Pleroma.

At first glance, these ideas may seem no more credible than any creed espoused by other religions. However, there is not only the offer of direct experience of their truth through gnosis, but a powerful logic.

Smoley, who was the editor of Gnosis magazine, explains the difference between this intuitive knowledge of our spiritual dilemma and the born-again Christian experience:

Evangelical Christians may claim that gnosis is a nebulous substitute for a personal relationship with Jesus Chris. Certainly, it is possible to have a

living experience of Christ, or of other great masters and teachers who are no longer living on the physical plane; such experiences are far too numerous and well documented to be casually dismissed…This leads us to ask just what it is that people are experiencing when they are “born again.”

The believer creates a mental picture of Jesus from what he knows from reading the Bible or going to church, the mind then makes this picture come to life (which it can easily do), and then he has a relationship with what amounts to little more than an imaginary friend.

The cognitive awakening of gnosis is usually a gradual process, rather than a single, transformative vision. This liberation of the true “I” from the world does not make moral behavior irrelevant; it makes it easier. Detachment from externalities makes it easier to love one’s fellow humans, because one is then free from wanting things and nursing hidden agendas.

It is worth noting that while Gnostics do not have a set of commandments engraved on stone tablets, they do think they should follow the fundamental ethical teachings of Jesus, which Robinson’s analysis extracts (not the sort of things that get much emphasis among evangelicals, like helping the poor).

Smith, who is the editor of The Gnostic: A Journal of Gnosticism, Western Esotericism and Spirituality, wrote:

True gnosis is direct knowledge of the Self and the truth about the universe. Knowledge of oneself becomes knowledge of God, because the deepest and highest part of us is akin to the divine. Gnosis is connected to the modern spiritual and psychological concept of consciousness. Some writers have coined terms like superconsciousness…

Gnostic teachings provide us with a meaningful intellectual structure that explains life on earth and also provides techniques by which we might experience these moments of illumination once again. This is gnosis—the direct experience of higher reality and of the divine self, accompanied by knowledge of what is being experienced, the importance of the experience, and its relationship to the rest of the universe.

And what techniques can lead to awakening, preferably learned from someone who has undergone the experience? Among them:

- Study and contemplation. “The intent of the sayings of Jesus in the Gnostic scriptures seems similar to that of Zen koans,” wrote Hoeller. “They are not so much designed to convey information as they are calculated to cause spiritual transformation in the disciple.” And reading what scholars have to say about the meaning of scriptures can help offset the traditional misconceptions, laying the groundwork for spiritual enlightenment.
- Prayer to the Transcendent God (paradoxical though it may seem to ask for enlightenment and blessings from an Absolute, mystics ask us to trust that this works). Also, according to one’s tradition, other guidance could come from Jesus, aeons, angels, and ancestors.
- Meditation.
- Fasting.
- Rhythmic breathing.
- The Eucharist or sacramental meal (the blood and body have different meanings than for mainstream Christians, who believe Jesus’ physical suffering was important). Those who are psychically sensitive have reported sensing the spiritual energy rise while this mass is being performed.
- Other sacramental rituals, such as baptism and anointing.
- Use of incense accompanying ritual.
- Chanting.
- Singing hymns.
- Sacred dancing.
- Anything which aids knowledge of oneself leads towards God. Thomas quoted Jesus: “When you know yourselves, then you will be known and you will understand that you are children of the living Father…When you

bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you."

Why There Is Suffering

We come back to the fundamental question of why we are on earth. Are any of the traditional answers adequate?

Christians, Jews, and Muslims are committed to the concept that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and created all things. Because scriptures say God is good and he declared his creation of the earth and its population "good," they have to insist they he has no responsibility for suffering

The best they can come up with to explain suffering is that this gives us a chance to grow. Never mind that there is little proportionality between the massive pain and the lessons learned.

Fundamentalists also insist that their version of God must be accepted or the heretic deserves eternal damnation, including the billions who died before this religion was available. Yet why should embracing something on faith—with all the confusing choices in a particular culture—be the basis for eternal reward or punishment?

The East offers answers that are only superficially more appealing. If one takes the extreme metaphysical monist philosophers of Buddhism and Hinduism seriously, we are only imagining our individual existence.

This view, that suffering is illusion, is shared by Christian Science and the popular New Age text The Course in Miracles. It is a good thing that none of them were making decisions for the Allies during World War II, which turned out not to be a phantom.

Dualism is another possible explanation for the state of the world. In this case, I am not referring to metaphysical monism, which insists that God is actually all things (the Advaita position), while a dualist would say God created the universe of a substance other than himself (the orthodox Christian view).

I am, instead, referring to whether God is all-powerful. If there is no countervailing power to God, if he created everything, he is responsible for the tendencies of his creatures. That is moral monism.

But Manichaeanism, the most stark form of moral dualism, states that there has been an eternal conflict between the Father of Light and the Father of Darkness. We have fallen into the material world and our job is to get back to the light. This has the benefit of not being burdened with trying to explain why a personal God intentionally put us into a world of massive physical and emotional suffering.

However, it does not explain how these opposed powers arose, but perhaps the Mormons are right that "intelligence" or consciousness has always existed and the gods always found it to be a mixture of good and evil.

Christian Gnostics would not say that the being who created the earth, known as the Demiurge (who has the attributes of Jehovah), was equal to the Transcendent God (who sounds like the Absolute of physicists, not deists, who attribute goodness to him, though he abandoned his creation).

Gnostics vary in how far they soften the dualist edges. Most would probably be described as "mitigated dualists," who do not pretend earthly life is God's way of helping us progress, while being optimistic that divine power make it possible to transcend the evil of the world, despite the influence of the Demiurge.

Some Gnostics, however, would agree with monotheism that everything ultimately comes from God, embracing monism. I do not think this is a matter of debating how many angels can fit on the head of a pin: there are consequences for philosophical positions.

Social liberals, who are the type to seek a religion with fewer rules and no hell, are uncomfortable with labeling anything truly evil. For the same reason, they favor relatively mild punishment of criminals. For those who do not find Eastern philosophy appealing, they would be attracted to a Gnosticism that was less black-and-white about labeling anything evil.

So when Valentinian writings declare that “God is the one who created the universe,” liberals feel vindicated in their hope that that material reality was created by God or effectively with his permission.

Pagels is thus pleased to report that the Catholic Fathers had a hard time screening out the Valentinians because they used similar language about God, whereas the Marcionites, with their condemnation of the books that would form the Old Testament, were easy to identify and excommunicate.

One Gnostic writer nervously assures readers that the Demiurge, so troubling to those uncomfortable with evil, is “only mentioned in 78% of the Nag Hammadi texts” (we should be so lucky if 78% of the books in the New Testament clearly agreed on anything).

Another author argues that the best form of Gnosticism embraces the monism of the Hermetic tradition, a pagan cousin of Gnosticism.

Moral monists even uses the traditional Christian argument that since God is all-powerful, the only so-called evil is simply a lack of good or is due to ignorance, tolerated temporarily by God for his long-term purposes. C.S. Lewis argued in Mere Christianity that Satan was only a parasite. Valentinians thought the Demiurge was merely ignorant While the end result is the same, it seems to me morally timid to say that the real problem with Hitler, Stalin, and Mao was that they were ignorant.

Since Gnostics have no reason to claim that the creator of the world is all-powerful, unlike monotheists, I find this ethical timidity baffling. However, as long as they do not fall into the trap of thinking that earthly life is in some way serving God’s purposes, Gnosticism can be distinguished from traditional Western religion, which puts the entire blame on man for evil in the world.

The Myth of Creation

Unless one accepts the absolute metaphysical dualist position that ultimate good and evil have been components of reality for eternity, one is left with

the need to explain how evil arose. The critical issue is who or what was responsible for bringing man into this world. Several elements need to be considered.

First, if a personal God whose values we share looked down on earth, he ought to be horrified. So accepting that the Transcendent God is not personal goes some ways to recognizing that he is not a version of a sadistic Zeus toying with the mortals. He may be more like the Absolute even many physicists think is behind the laws of the universe, as we discussed in Chapter Four.

We do not have to fully understand the Absolute to both attribute to him essential goodness, taking the mystics in every tradition at their word, while recognizing he is isolated from the material sphere.

Second, we can turn to the Gnostic myth of creation. A myth is not a fairy tale, as the word is often misused, but a story that relates higher truths. There are a variety of forms this has taken for the tale of the Gnostic creation, so let us set out a simplified version of the common highlights:

Sophia/Wisdom was the youngest of the aeons, farthest away from the primal light of the Father. She saw a light in the distance and thought it was that of the Father, but it turned out to be a mere reflection. Her curiosity led her into the depths too far.

At this point, her higher self became enlightened and ascended back into the Pleroma. But her lower self was confused and alienated. In her distress, she manifested energy that became the building blocks of the material universe.

This led to a hybrid form of consciousness in the world of mind and material, the Demiurge. He was unaware of the spiritual world and came to believe he was the ruler of the cosmos (he could have been shut off from higher reality in the same way humans are isolated from easy contact with the spiritual world).

The creation of the earth followed, with humans inheriting the divine spark

from Sophia. The Demiurge created archons to assist him: these are the beings who refer to themselves as “we” in the Genesis 2 and 3, where Adam and Eve are forbidden to partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Meanwhile, Sophia received help from the aeon Christos to start the retrieval of the divine sparks embedded in human beings. Eventually, they will succeed.

One might ask why the Demiurge is said to be so hostile to humanity. Those Gnostics who take the myth as reflecting real events, even if symbolically, tend to think he is the equivalent to the evil spirits shamans encounter; some entities are bent from the beginning or become warped. Or it could be an impersonal negative force.

Regardless, someone or something is responsible for humanity’s dilemma and it makes no sense that this is the work of a Good God. If it were a cosmic accident, this would explain why we have never found intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.

Interpreting the Myth

“Modern Gnostics no more take seriously the Gnostic myths as literal truth than Valentinian Gnostics interpreted the New Testament literally,” asserts Smith. “The Gnostic myths can be ‘a myth to live by,’ as mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote.”

Smoley, in Inner Christianity, provides an esoteric interpretation of Adam and Eve’s experience: “The Garden of Eden was not a place on earth, it existed on another plane from the physical realm we know. This is the world of “forms,” or what is sometimes called the imaginal realm. The primordial man and woman were made of subtler stuff than our physical bodies are now. Only after the Fall did we descend into physicality.”

Churton puts forth the psychological theory:

The Sophia myth is revealed as a parable of the reflexive consciousness, like the Eden story transposed to the being of God, with Sophia playing the part of Eve, wherein the fatal apple is replaced by a more satisfying fruit: knowledge of why the fruit of dialectical thought (or material consciousness) is poisonous.

Insofar as a human being seeks to "know," the material world of three or more dimensions discerned by the five senses is created. The more a person seeks to know, the more the world is created. Thus the person "falls" into the world.

Materially speaking, the entire myth takes place in the mind. Hence, the person who is "tired of the world" invariably seeks either innocence (the world unknown) or oblivion (loss of consciousness). Spiritual man created the universe (of his knowing), but has forgotten both how and why he did it…

The Demiurge, the false God who knows no higher than himself, could be said to be the world-making perceptual faculty of human beings, the ego, or false self.

Hoeller, in Jung and the Lost Gospels, suggests that Carl Jung's depth psychology provides another way of interpreting mythology and religious experience:

Jung's discovery of the collective unconscious has made it possible to approach experiences and ideas that hitherto have been conceived as religious or metaphysical, in a new way, a mediating hypothesis between the traditional belief and modern psychology: "There are present in every psyche forms which are unconscious, but nevertheless active—living dispositions, ideas in the Platonic sense, that perform and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions."

Jung defined an archetype (primordial image) as "a figure—be it a daemon, a human being, or a process—wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed." Human beings inherently know the archetypes are autonomous, that they

obey their own sovereign laws, and while they are in the nature of internal experiences they reflect themselves onto the screen of external human experience. Archetypes are thus present simultaneously in the internal structures of the human psyche and also in the arena of history. We may call them aeonic beings after the fashion of the Gnostics or psychoid archetypes, following Jung's intimations.

I do think that all religions need to address how it came to be that our spirits inhabit bodies. A purely psychological interpretation of mythology, though it illuminates human alienation from the higher self, does not explain evolution or what happens when we die. However symbolically rendered, the Gnostic myth of our earthly dilemma has several advantages over alternatives.

On the one hand, atheists accept the idea of human life being the outcome of a series of accidents. But they have to disregard both the massive number of human encounters with the paranormal. Like evangelicals, they refused to objectively look at the arguments that do not match their preconceptions.

On the other hand, traditional religion is based on interpretations imposed on scriptures late in their history, which also contradict each other and common sense. There is no way to reconcile the notion that God is good with an intentional creation.

Neither the "illusion" of Eastern religions or the "bad is actually good" theory of Western ones makes any sense.

One fair criticism of Gnosticism might be why divine forces are not sufficient to liberate all spirits immediately (assuming they are not purely psychological). Perhaps the Manichaeans were right, that evil has a tremendous power in this dimension.

Regardless of the details (to which we may never be privy in this life), once insight about our spiritual potential has been gained, one can approach life with freedom from the fear of death and from superstitions, religious and secular.

Modern Manifestations

After the destruction of Manichaeanism in China in the 9th century and the Cathar Church in Europe the 15th century, only isolated groups practiced any form of organized Gnosticism (most notably, the Mandaeans, numbering as many as 70,000 in southern Iraq, but now dispersed)

The Renaissance saw the translation of ancient Hellenistic manuscripts, which renewed interest in all things esoteric, especially Hermeticism (a fascinating topic covered in-depth by some of the other sources cited).

During the Enlightenment, the great German writer and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe modeled his Faust on Simon Magus. In England, the artist, writer, and mystic, William Blake, influenced by Neoplatonic writings and accounts by the Church Fathers, featured the demiurgic characters Urthona, Urizen, and Nobodaddy in his work.

Modern spiritual movements influenced by Gnosticism include Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, and followers of the Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff and his chief disciple, the Russian author P.D. Ouspensky.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, a variety of Christian Gnostic churches were founded in Europe and the U.S., as discussed by Hoeller and Smith, recognition of the relevance of the philosophy to a modern world that has stared ultimate evil in the face.

Neo-Gnostic movements have been especially strong in France, where Cathar sites are popular tourist attractions. National Geographic named the "Cathar Country" of southern France one of the 20 Best of the World trips for 2014. The online story was much longer than the printed version, including this: "'We are all Cathars here,' declares an art student, sketching amid the aromatic blossoms and Romanesque arcades of Albi's St.-Salvi Cloister. He refers to the ascetic, heretical Christian sect that stirred up southwest France in the 12th and 13th centuries. (Some its followers believed in reincarnation.) Beyond the town, rocky hiking paths splay out in all directions, arteries of

history that keep alive the region's wild lore."

The eminent literary critic Harold Bloom, in Omens of the Millennium, cited the 20th century growth of "that most American of religions, Mormonism, which has a vitalism that is astonishing," as a sign of the Gnostic resurrection. He praised founder Joseph Smith as pragmatic, yet "the greatest, most authentic of American prophets, seers and revelators, teaching a daring doctrine that is both Hermetic and Kabbalistic…including the plurality of gods."

Yet it is distinctive, attempting to reconcile the Old Testament with the New and seeing earth life as an opportunity for growth, with typical American worldly optimism.

Gnostic ideas have also flourished in modern literature. Smith cites some of the novelists and poets who have shown strong interest, including Herman Melville, W. B. Yeats, Albert Camus, Hermann Hesse, Lawrence Durrell, Jorge Luis Borges, the science fiction writers Philip K. Dick and Philip Pullman, and graphic novelist Alan Moore.

Churton calls the "visual canon of the 20th century" a kind of "controlled explosion of gnostic dreams and ideas," citing the occult influences on painters Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko.

Smoley says of 1999's film The Matrix, "The parallels are easy to see. Neo is 'saved' not through faith but through a secret knowledge that liberates the consciousness and also reveals the ultimate nature of the reality he has believed in up to now."

Dan Brown's novels, like The Da Vinci Code, did not sell 200 million copies because he is a better writer than others. While they were largely filled with fictional versions of Gnostic and esoteric ideas, there is clearly a global hunger for a fresh perspective on the human spiritual predicament.

"In our highest moments, we glimpse a world that is more real than that of the body and matter, or even more real than the inner world of everyday emotions, sensation and the chain of associations that constitutes our inner

lives," wrote Smith. "The Gnostic view of the world may initially seem bleak or even negative, but it offers hope. Certainly the opportunities for gnosis are greater now than they may have been for several centuries."